

M.R. CORNELIUS



THE UPS AND  
DOWNS OF  
BEING DEAD

# **The Ups and Downs of Being Dead**

## **M. R. Cornelius**

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And to Mike Darwin: Are you still out there?

## CHAPTER ONE

Robert's legs buckled, refusing to support him. He gripped the back of an armchair, a muted blue and beige plaid no doubt intended to sooth visitors during their death vigil. His body swayed like a drunken teenager on his first binge. The walls of the room seemed to be tilting.

The plaid design of the chair blurred in and out of focus, heightening his dizziness. Unable to raise his head to escape the wavering lines, Robert closed his eyes.

Just a moment ago, searing pain had racked his body. He'd stiffened every muscle to endure that latest wave of torture. But now as he hovered in the corner of the hospice room, his body was pleasantly numb.

"On my count, one-two-*three*."

A voice seemed to be commanding Robert to do something. Straighten up? Snap out of it? He pried his heavy eyelids open.

Across the room, two staffers in white lab coats gripped the lifeless arms and legs of Robert's body and lowered it into what looked like a white plastic coffin. The feeling of disconnect intensified. Robert raised his right hand in front of his face, turning it to view both sides. It sure seemed like he was standing in the corner.

The petite blonde running the show was Anne. She wasn't part of the hospice staff. She was here strictly for retrieval.

Her assistant was a burly jock with hairy arms and sloping shoulders, the muscle of the operation. While the jock wheeled a big cooler of ice closer to Robert's body in the white coffin, Anne started an IV, then twisted open the port on a bag of fluid suspended on a pole. The fluid was for damage control, Robert had been told. If the blood didn't continue to flow freely through the brain, too much calcium built up, neurons got damaged, free radicals went wild, blah, blah, blah. Robert couldn't remember all he'd been told

about the procedure, but basically the fluid was supposed to keep a lot of damage from happening to his body during transport.

He tried to massage his temples with his fingertips, but got no relief from the muddle in his head. He'd just been whispering something to Anne when all the bells and beepers went off.

It was about the smell in the room. The necrotic stench of cancer was everywhere, a permanent odor in his nose that he could almost taste. He'd been wondering why someone on the staff hadn't noticed and at least sprayed some kind of deodorizer or opened a window to freshen the air. Now he couldn't smell anything.

Anne nestled Robert's head into a separate compartment of the plastic coffin, taking extra care to ease the neck into a recess similar to the one used by the shampoo girl at the salon where Robert used to get his hair styled.

Robert glanced at the clock on the bedside table. 8:35AM. Amanda was probably still sleeping, with that goofy chin strap cinched up tight to ward off sagging jowls, and her lotion-slathered hands tucked into her special gloves. She'd refused to come to the hospice. Instead, she'd made one last stab at making him feel like a moron for doing this.

The clacking of ice distracted Robert, and he moved closer to watch Anne shovel the frozen cubes around his head until his face was covered. Then she fitted a white plastic lid in place and clamped it shut. Fear lurched in Robert's belly again.

As Anne worked, the jock fastened an apparatus across the white coffin at chest level. The contraption looked like a motor from an ice cream maker, only instead of locking a paddle into the underside of the motor, the guy popped in a big suction cup. With a rubber-gloved hand, he smeared clear goo onto Robert's lifeless chest, and then started what was called 'the thumper'.

When the suction cup pressed down on the chest, it forced the heart of the dearly departed to circulate thinned blood through dead arteries, and when the suction cup pulled up, it expanded the chest, drawing air into non-functioning lungs. They called it cardio-pulmonary support. CPS, not CPR. There would be no resuscitation today.

Once both staffers completed their tasks, they piled blue ice packs around the torso and limbs. Anne checked her watch. "Let's roll."

Unlocking the wheels, the jock steered the white coffin out of the hospice room. The steady suck and woosh of the thumper reverberated down the short hallway to double doors that slid open automatically. Anne stepped into the back of the ambulance to guide the box, while the jock shoved the human ice chest inside. Robert climbed aboard, and heard the doors bang shut behind him.

Euphoria settled over him, a giddiness that begged for giggles. It was over: the chemo that left him weak and nauseous, the pain that no amount of drugs could eliminate, those phony tears Amanda always managed to conjure up at the clinic, even the alarming clumps of his hair snagged in his comb. Done. Finished.

But not dead. Like Alex Darden had said, "You won't be deceased, Robert. You'll be cryonically preserved."

Geez, he hoped this worked.

## CHAPTER TWO

Without sirens or flashing lights, the ambulance turned into a non-descript industrial park at the edge of town, and drove to the back where the Cryonics Center sat unobtrusively between a custom plastics fabricator and a commercial printing shop. Robert had intentionally arranged to spend his final days at the hospice across town so he could be transported quickly to the center.

As he'd lain in a morphine haze waiting for the cancer to finish him off, he'd deluded himself with fantasies that Alex Darden would come to the hospice to sit at his bedside. Even that morning, as Robert felt his life slipping away, he'd kept an eye on the door, willing Alex to appear.

Now that the pain and delirium had faded, Robert understood his obsession with seeing Alex one last time. He'd wanted the reassurance that he was doing the right thing. In hindsight, he was damn lucky their paths had crossed a year ago.

They were both flying to Atlanta. Robert was heading home. Alex was on his way to a lecture at Georgia Tech. No sooner had Alex buckled his seat belt, than he had his laptop out, clicking away at the keyboard, his knee bouncing, his head nodding as though he were deep in conversation.

He seemed totally oblivious to passengers shuffling by on their way to coach, and to Robert, who sat sipping the scotch he'd requested the moment he stepped on board.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert glimpsed pictures of dissected animals and what looked like frozen organs on Alex's laptop. When a picture of a naked man on a stainless steel gurney popped onto the screen, Robert choked on his cocktail.

With feigned surprise, Alex raised his head and flashed a smile at Robert. He reminded Robert of Freddie Mercury from

Queen with his dark, bushy mustache and toothy grin.

"Didn't mean to shock you," Alex had said. "I guess I've become immune to all this."

"What are you?" Robert asked. "A coroner?"

"No. Actually, I'm a cryoengineer. I'm on my way to Georgia Tech to discuss molecular nanotechnology."

All it took was Robert's clueless expression to keep Alex going. "With nanotechnology, we'll be able to build and repair anything, cure cancer, reverse aging, even teach the body to re-grow a limb."

By this time, Alex was projecting to anyone in first class interested in listening. "But the most exciting application is revival of a preserved human. We'll be able to bring back the dead."

The old man across the aisle was the first to jump into the conversation. "Like Ted Williams."

"Exactly!" Alex beamed as he scanned the seats nearby to see who else was eavesdropping. Then he leaned out into the aisle, toward the old man. "You might be surprised at the number of scientists and VIP's who have already signed up to be cryonically preserved."

"I don't get it, though," the old man said. "Won't Ted Williams be too old to play baseball when he comes back?"

"No!" Alex's voice carried all the way up to the flight attendant who was preparing to give her preflight demonstration. Her head snapped up to see if she had a disturbance on her hands. But most of the passengers in first class were engrossed in Alex's impromptu presentation.

"If we can rebuild tissue and repair failing organs," Alex said, "Mr. Williams can potentially have a whole new career sometime in the future."

At that point, Robert had turned to the window to watch as the airplane taxied to the runways. He'd heard rumors of Einstein's brain in a freezer somewhere. Walt Disney, too. It all sounded like a get-rich-quick scheme designed to separate suckers from their retirement funds.



But the gentleman across the aisle was really pumping Alex for information. No doubt, the old man felt the hands of time around his neck and was willing to consider any option. It sounded like a good idea for a science fiction movie.

“How long before you can bring these people back?” the old man asked.

“The simple truth is, we don’t know.” Alex let his statement hang in the air for just a second. “We do know that we have to be able to work on the atomic or molecular level, and currently we don’t have that technology. Like Ralph Merkle says, with our present technology, we’re basically trying to build Lego castles wearing boxing gloves. But someday we’ll be able to reassemble cells and tissues one molecule at a time.”

An announcement from the captain instructed the flight attendants to take their seats, and the airplane streaked down the runway. But the moment the plane leveled off, Alex reeled his audience back in. He leaned into the aisle to address everyone.

“Remember back in the sixties when they first built computers that took up a whole room? If you’d asked one of those guys, ‘How soon will I be able to carry a computer around in my pocket?’, he would have looked at you like you were crazy! Then he would have said the same thing as me. ‘I don’t know’.”

Alex slipped his Smartphone out and held it up. “They knew it was a matter of making the components smaller, but back then, they didn’t know how.”

By now, the flight attendant had propped an elbow on the seat in front of Alex. Robert swirled the ice in his empty glass, but she didn’t take the hint.

She asked Alex, “How does making things smaller bring back the dead?”

“First of all,” Alex pressed his palms together, “let’s stop using the term dead. Our patients aren’t dead, they’re cryonically preserved.”

A woman who had tilted her seat back to get a peek at Alex nodded along with the others.

"Okay." Alex drummed his fingers against each other. "Let's talk about sperm."

He chuckled when the attendant's mouth dropped open. "They're like little robots programmed with incredible amounts of information," he said. "They have the DNA to build a human being, or at least half of one. They know where they need to go, and they're competitive enough to want to be first. Once they reach their target, they know how to break through a barrier and release this DNA. All we're trying to do is create our own nano-robots that will take the DNA of who you were, and build you again."

\* \* \*

Robert's ice coffin was pulled from the back of the ambulance. He stepped out behind the burly jock and followed as his remains were rolled through a back entrance of the Cryonics Center. The jock pushed the cart straight ahead into a state-of-the-art surgical room with a stainless steel table and bright overhead lights.

Pausing for just a second, Robert glanced down the short hallway to the lobby at the front of the center. Seated in the reception area was an elderly woman who must have been close to 100 years old. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, and her body appeared to have shrunk in on itself. Next to her, a gray-haired man waited patiently. He must have been making arrangements to have his mother preserved. And not a moment too soon.

The old woman raised her palm slightly, her mouth set in a serene smile. Robert waved at her, then shook his head at the gaff before he hustled into the surgical suite just as the doors fluttered shut.

Standing off to the side, he watched as staffers, dressed in surgical gowns and masks, scurried about adjusting dials on

machines and checking monitors. It was like he'd just been wheeled into an emergency room and only had seconds to live.

Two surgeons charged backwards into the room, their gloved hands elevated to remain germ free. A technician aimed a glaring light on Robert's naked body, while a nurse swabbed his chest with disinfectant. Another technician stuck temperature monitors under Robert's arms, between his legs, on the back of his neck. The quicker they got his body temperature lowered, the better. Right now, Robert's body was like a raw steak on the counter, going bad.

Just like open-heart surgery, one of the surgeon made an incision along the sternum, used a saw to cut through the bone, and cracked open Robert's chest. A tube was inserted into Robert's aorta, another into the vena cava leading from the top right atrium. The intention was to pump a solution of balanced sugars and salts to flush out the body and cool it. Alex Darden had called this the blood washout.

Moving in closer, Robert watched a steady red stream flow through a clear tube down the side of the table and into a drain in the floor. A nurse stepped to the side to pick-up an instrument and Robert tried to jump out of her way. Her hand passed right through his stomach. He gasped, as though it might hurt, but he felt nothing. And obviously, she didn't feel anything either because she didn't suddenly call out or drop the clamp in her hand. She had no idea Robert was standing there.

He thought again about the old woman in the lobby. It sure seemed like she'd been waving at him. But that was impossible. No one else could see him. He was just in limbo here, killing time until they put him in the deep freeze. So, what was that wave all about?

He sidestepped over to the door and peeked out through a small window, but the woman was gone. Shaking his head, he returned to the action on the table, assuring himself that

she had raised her palm, that's all. Maybe her son had said something to her and that was her reply.

The staff bustled about tidying up, throwing away bloody gauze pads, collecting used instruments while they waited for the last of his blood to drain away. Robert's attempt to wring his hands was futile.

"Please don't let this be a sick joke," he mumbled.

\* \* \*

At first, he'd done what any intelligent man would do when the doctor folded his hands on his desk and quietly said, 'You have cancer.' Robert got a second opinion.

That noted oncologist laid it out in a way Robert could not deny. Like an advertising campaign, the doctor presented images from an MRI and pointed out the large mass in Robert's liver. Then he produced colorful brochures on the finest cancer treatment centers, pamphlets touting the latest pharmaceuticals, and of course, the bar graphs and pie charts that estimated how long Robert had to live.

For the first time in almost thirty years, Robert took the rest of the day off. He struggled to get through the telephone conversation with his secretary canceling appointments, rearranging meetings. By the time he ended the call, Robert felt so weak he'd braced his arm on the roof of his car and rested his forehead on the sleeve of his hand-tailored suit. Struggling for breath, he was unable to even stop the drool that oozed out of his gaping mouth and dribbled down the window of his Mercedes.

Stale exhaust fumes in the parking garage choked Robert, the low clearance closed in on him. He was practically running when he came out onto the open top level. The heat of the day washed over Robert, and his body sagged. He lurched to the edge of the roof, and looked out over Atlanta, the classic query drumming in his head. 'Why me?'

When Amanda heard he was dying, she rushed home from her shopping trip in New York. Robert was in his office, on the phone, when she burst in, her cheeks flushed, her eyes aglow. If he had to describe her expression in one word, it would have been *exuberant*.

Almost overnight, she transformed into a loving, sacrificing wife who put everything on hold for him. She drove him to his chemo appointments. She waited patiently outside the bathroom while he puked his guts out, then helped him back to bed, tucking brand-new sheets under his chin. Death sheets, he'd called them. He was certain she'd agonized over just the right shade and design to go with cancer.

She volunteered for the American Cancer Society, masquerading as a pillar of strength in front of other spouses of dying partners. She even participated in one of those walks – Amanda, who probably hadn't worn a pair of sneakers since she was ten. And she never went anywhere without that goofy pink ribbon pinned to her clothing.

Robert was sure the only reason she got so involved with the cancer organization was to get first-hand information on how soon he could be expected to croak. She couldn't wait to get her hands on his millions.

Wouldn't she be surprised?

\* \* \*

"Running clear," someone said through his surgical mask.

The blood washout was complete. Now came the tricky part. The surgical team would pump a preservative through Robert's heart and into his body, so that every organ, every blood vessel, and most importantly, his brain would be protected.

Water was the enemy. Alex had compared freezing liquid in blood vessels to the hoses in old style automobile radiators. Before anti-freeze, water was used in radiators to

cool engines. But water molecules are pushy little buggers. As the temperature drops, water molecules like to congregate, squeezing other molecules aside. And as water turns to ice, it expands. In a car, this expansion cracked radiators, and ripped rubber hoses apart. In the body, freezing water created the same kind of havoc in blood vessels and in the tissue of the brain.

Alex scoffed at a critic of cryonics who used the analogy of frozen strawberries that turned to mush when thawed.

"That is certainly true, because of all the water in the fruit," Alex had told Robert. "But we are replacing most of the water with our cryoprotectant. Your brain will not be mush when it is reanimated."

\* \* \*

"Don't be nervous, Robert. It's going very well."

Jumping back from the surgical table, Robert glanced quickly around the room. "What?"

The old lady he'd seen in the lobby stood a few feet away. She raised her palm again for a wave. She looked even older up close. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, as though someone had wadded up her skin and then tried unsuccessfully to smooth it back over her skull. A slight woman, she stood maybe five feet, with bird bones that poked out at her elbows and shoulders. She reminded Robert of that little old lady who stepped up to the counter and asked, "Where's the beef?"

"Your procedure," she said. "Everything's happening just like it should."

His thoughts whirled. "You can see me?"

"Yes," she nodded.

The gray-haired gentlemen from the lobby slipped up beside the woman. He nodded, too. The wear and tear of age showed in his sagging jowls. Liver spots dotted his face and arms.

“How do you know my name?” Robert asked.

Stepping forward, the man extended a hand, like he wanted to shake.

“Sam Parker. This is Maggie Nelson. We’re here to help you with your transition.”

Stunned, Robert mumbled, “My transition?”

“From the living to the dead,” Maggie said.

“But I’m not dead!” Robert protested. “I’m being cryonically-preserved—”

Sam and Maggie both chuckled.

“That’s right,” Maggie assured him. “And a hundred years from now, you’ll be right back out there, good as new.”

The harsh scream of a drill drew their attention to the surgical team.

“Ah,” Sam said. “They’re starting the vitrification process. That’s where they slowly replace the water in your body with the cryoprotectant, the anti-freeze.”

“So I’ve been told,” Robert said.

“Since you picked the whole body preservation, it’ll take close to three days for the fluid to get all the way to the tiniest capillaries.”

“Didn’t you do whole body?” Robert asked.

“Nah. All they really need is the brain since that’s the only organ that truly makes us who we are,” Sam said. “All the other organs, tissue, bones and blood will be recreated from the DNA they get from my brain.”

“I don’t know,” Robert said, “The brain-only option gave me the creeps. What if someone in the future decides it’ll be easier to just pop my brain into an existing body? What if people become body donors? Or somebody bumps off cousin Louie and sells his body on the black market to make a quick buck?”

“That will never happen,” Sam said, with a cocky bobble of the head. “Most likely, your brain will be transplanted into a clone grown from your DNA.”

“Alex didn’t tell me that,” Robert said.

“They didn’t tell me that either,” Maggie said. “I think the cryonics people stay intentionally vague, because no one really knows how we’ll be revived. But Sam follows all that technological stuff. He keeps us informed.”

The surgeon finished drilling holes in Robert’s head.

“Geez,” Robert muttered. “They sure tear your body up. I don’t think they’re going to sew my chest shut. Now I’ve got holes in my skull.”

He wondered if he’d be able to part his hair after he was revived and show someone the scars.

“The holes are necessary to monitor the brain for fractures,” Sam said. “As your body temperature drops, hopefully your brain will shrink slightly. They definitely don’t want swelling.”

Maggie stood next to Robert as two techs lifted his body and lowered it into a special freezing chamber made of clear plastic. It was designed with two ports on one side where a tech could reach in to make adjustments.

“By the time they’re finished,” she said, “Your body temperature will be at minus 190 degrees Celsius: the temperature of liquid nitrogen.”

“And then I guess that’s it,” Robert said. “They’ll stick me in one of those tanks and I’ll wake up some time in the future.”

The wrinkles on Maggie’s face got even deeper as she squinched her cheeks. “Well, that’s not necessarily the case.”



## CHAPTER THREE

"You aren't going to go to sleep," Sam told Robert. His voice nearly chirped with enthusiasm, but behind the smile was something else.

"I'm not?" Robert turned to Maggie for a confirmation.

She shook her head. "I was frozen a year and a half ago. Sam's been around for almost three years."

Panic washed over Robert. "'But they told me I'd go to sleep and wake up in the future."

"Yeah, well, surprise!" Sam said, raising his eyebrows. "They told us the same thing."

"You mean we just have to wait around in here for a hundred years?"

"No, no, no," Sam said, waving his hands. "We can go anywhere we want now. That's why we're here. To show you all the cool things you can do."

Robert stared at the stainless steel doors. "I'm not going to sleep?"

"No, my friend," Sam said. "Not for a very long time."

He tried to throw an arm over Robert's shoulders in a show of camaraderie, but the gesture was useless. Robert felt nothing.

"So what am I going to do?"

Maggie and Sam both laughed. Did they find his *question* amusing, or his hysteria?

"You can do anything, Robert." Maggie motioned toward the steel doors again. "Well, almost anything."

As Sam walked Robert toward the exit, he raised a finger. "A couple of caveats. You can't go forward or back in time."

Over her shoulder, Maggie said, "We don't eat or drink or sleep."

"You won't ever have to leave the ball game at the seventh inning to take a piss," Sam confided.

"Once you get the hang of passing through objects," Maggie said, "You can go behind locked doors, into buildings that are closed for the day. You can go back stage at strip joints, inside women's locker rooms." She winked at him!

"Why would I do that?"

Robert gave her his best 'stern' look, complete with twitching eyebrow. Who was this cheeky old bag?

She snorted. "That's one of the first things most men do when they leave here. Go ogle naked women."

"Believe me," Robert said. "I've seen plenty of models in lingerie and bathing suits. I have no desire to watch desperate women remove their clothes for cash."

"That's right," she said, rolling her eyes. "You're the Audrey's magnate."

"We heard you donated an extra two-point-five million to the center," Sam said.

"That was supposed to be confidential," Robert scolded, but he was a bit flattered that the news had gotten out.

"We're not part of the general public anymore," Maggie told him.

"That's right," Sam added with a waggle of his eyebrow. "We hear private conversations, read confidential memos. And we're not restricted by scheduled hours of business, or those locked doors. It's really quite simple once you get the hang of it."

To demonstrate, Sam pushed his arm through the steel door. "Wooden doors are the easiest," he said. "Glass is a little tougher, and these insulated steel doors can be a little tricky the first time."

Maggie and Sam passed through the door a couple times just to reassure Robert it was possible, but as he stood in front of the heavy steel obstacle, fear gripped him. What if he got stuck in the middle? What if he split into a million tiny parts and floated away?

"Does anyone decide to just wait here?" he asked.

“One of our patients stayed,” Sam said. “Once he learned how, Albert Jackson slipped into the stainless steel container with his body. Said he didn’t want to see all the changes in the world. He just wants to come back and be surprised. Like Christmas morning. He said that way, if the reanimation process doesn’t work, he’ll never know what he missed. Personally, I think he’s a moron.”

During his tour of the center, Robert had been shown the storage area with rows of silver cylinders. The center called the 10-foot tall storage tanks Dewars.

“He’s just in there waiting?”

“Boring, huh?” Sam said.

“Come on,” Maggie urged. “Suck it up, Robert. Let’s get you out of here.”

For an old broad that barely stood five feet tall, she was pushy.

“Start with just a hand,” Sam said. “Press your palm into the door.”

“Just remember,” Maggie said, “there is no spoon.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you see the Matrix?” she asked.

Robert shook his head.

“Well, I highly recommend it. Put that on your list of things to do.”

Sam cleared his throat to get Robert’s attention. “Imagine that there is no door.” His own hand disappeared into the steel.

Shaking off his fear with a resolute jerk of his shoulder, Robert reached out his hand and whispered, “There is no door.”

His fingers slowly sank into the metal. But a strange tingling sensation scared him and he jerked his hand back.

“Weird, isn’t it?” Maggie said. “Kind of like when your hand falls asleep.”

“It’s because you’re passing through the door at the molecular level,” Sam said. “You can sense your own

essence being jostled by the atoms that make up steel and insulation.”

“We’ve often said that the administrators here at the center should have set up a little obstacle course with barriers like windows and brick walls,” Maggie said. “You know, to sort of ease us patients into the whole navigation process.”

“But they didn’t.” Sam was growing impatient. “So let’s go!”

Planting his feet farther apart, Robert locked his elbows and charged forward. At the last second, when his face got right to the surface, he cringed and reared his head back. But his body continued in its forward motion so his head bent back onto his shoulders in an unnatural position. He screamed.

His torso and legs reached the other side of the door before his head caught up. If he were alive, he would have messed his pants. Closing his eyes, he waited for the drunken wooziness to pass, and the tingle in his body to fade.

“You did it!” Maggie exclaimed.

“Yeah,” he whispered. He hoped he didn’t faint in front of this old woman.

Outside the center, a brisk wind sent dead, brittle leaves scuttering in front of Robert. The night he’d arrived at the hospice, an icy rain had stung his cheeks, the cold wind whipping at his pant-legs.

But now, Robert didn’t feel anything. In fact, he was quite comfortable strolling through the industrial park with Maggie and Sam.

“So, are you two related?” he asked.

“No, we just volunteered to man the center for three months,” Maggie said. “In case someone showed up. Like you.”

“The temps take turns,” Sam said.

“Temps?”

“All of us who are waiting to come back,” Maggie said. “There are seventy-one temps at the center.”

“Seventy-two now,” Sam said, “Counting you.”

At the end of the street, Maggie turned right and the three made their way toward a busy intersection. Robert had never been much of a walker—he’d had a driver for the past twenty years—but he wasn’t the least bit fatigued.

“We all meet twice a year, in June and December,” Sam said. “It’s the only way we can stay in touch with each other. You know, since we can’t use phones or e-mails.”

Maggie strolled along with a wide step, her arms swinging briskly. She acted more like a twenty year-old, than a decrepit old woman.

“The meetings are a lot of fun,” she said. “We catch up on what others are doing.”

“Yeah, and we find out what folks have planned for the next six months,” Sam said. “One of our temps is hanging out with President Sherman, in the oval office. Another is on the NASCAR circuit, riding in the car with Donny Childers.”

“I’m not into car racing,” Robert said.

“Me either,” Sam said with a shrug. “I was a bit of a stuffed shirt when I was alive. I taught microbiology for thirty years. Then retired and moved to Maine with my wife. Tended a garden, waited for my grandkids to come and visit. Pretty boring.”

Maggie turned and walked backwards. “I encourage our temps to try lots of things. How do we know car racing will even be around seventy-five years from now? Won’t that be something interesting to tell your new friends in the future?”

“So are you going to the racetrack when your three months is up?” Robert asked Sam.

“Well, no. Actually, I’m sitting in on a class on biochemistry at Stanford.”

Robert choked out a cough. “Oh, that’s a lot more interesting than gardening.”

“Hey, I went on a cruise down the Amazon last year,” Sam said. “Saw the rainforest, visited Machu Picchu. ”

Directing his attention to Maggie, Robert said, “And I suppose you’ve got a quilting bee lined up.”

“Oh, Robert,” Maggie said, shaking a finger at him. “You’re a smart aleck. I can see that we’re going to get along just fine.”

“Better be careful,” Sam warned. “Maggie’s a psychologist. Has been for...how long has it been, Maggie? Eighty years?”

Throwing back her head, Maggie hooted. “Maybe more. My mother swore I was analyzing kids in my kindergarten class. My husband, Joe says I was born a busybody.”

“Is he a temp, too?” Robert asked.

“No, he’s still alive. But he is a cryonics member. He’s all lined up to be preserved when his time comes.”

“What about you?” Sam asked. “Were you married?”

“Yes I was. For twenty-eight years.” Robert amended that in his mind. It had been twenty-eight long years.

\* \* \*

It was Spring, 1975. A friend of a friend had managed to get an extra invitation to Sherry McClintock’s post party for her debut at the New York fashion show. As it turned out, it was Sherry’s last post party as well. She’d thrown everything she had into her spring collection, so when the fall designs came out, her ideas were flat and lacked creativity.

Naturally, Ralph Lauren and Bill Blass were throwing their own soirees, but Robert could never wrangled an invite from the big boys. At the time, he was flattered to get into Sherry’s somewhat dismal bash.

Standing off to one side, Robert zeroed in on a voluptuous blonde working the room. She approached a guy who looked like he had just stepped off the dance floor in his bell-bottomed trousers and paisley polyester shirt with lapels

halfway to his waist. The way the woman's hips and shoulders swayed in a sensuous, fluid motion, she must have thought the man was someone important. When she spoke to Mr. Disco, her head cocked in a coquettish tilt.

At that moment, Robert concentrated every conscious thought into willing that woman to come over and thrust her body at him. His friend of a friend caught him drooling and gave him a nudge.

"She's gorgeous," he'd sighed. "Is she a model?"

"Are you kidding?" the friend snorted. "Look at those breasts. They're udders. And have you see her ass?"

Yes, in fact, Robert had seen that luscious ass; had already imagined gripping it with both hands. The woman was a goddess.

His friend shook her head. "She's a wannabe. With that figure, she'll never make the catwalk. My guess is she's trying to make it onto some magazine editor's couch."

Unfazed by his friend's comments, Robert took the initiative and approached the blonde. He felt quite confident in his pin-striped jacket with the wide lapels, and his Elton John platform shoes.

Sure enough, when the gorgeous blonde saw him, she thrust out her chest and gave him a coy smile. She didn't bother with introductions.

"Who are you with?" she asked.

The question threw Robert off, but he hastily explained that he'd come to the party with an old friend.

"No, silly." Her eyelids fluttered over emerald-green eyes. "Are you with a retailer or a magazine?"

Robert could still remember stretching up to appear taller, jutting his chin out to strike a pose as he informed the foxy lass that he was the owner of the Audrey's clothing chain.

She'd never heard of it.

He explained that his stores sold designer fashions at affordable prices.

“You mean knock-offs?” Her lush, full lips shrank into a snarl, and the gleam faded from her eyes as she scanned him up and down. “So, what does that make you? The Knock-off Gnome?”

Gnome? He was a good three inches taller than her. If she hadn’t been wearing those killer stilettos, he’d have towered over her. And the way she dismissed him—quickly turning away as though she had inadvertently spoken to someone on the wait-staff—any other man would have felt like a fool. But Robert took her rejection as a challenge. What a putz.

\* \* \*

Robert was just finishing a more upbeat version of meeting Amanda when Sam slowed at a small huddle of people at a bus stop.

“Here we go,” he said. “Let’s practice catching a bus.”

“Why bother?” Robert asked. “Didn’t you say I can just visualize where I want to go and be there?”

Pinching his lips, Sam nodded. “Sure you can. But you’ve got a good long time to wait. If we’re lucky, technology will catch up in maybe seventy-five years. So, what’s the need in rushing from place to place?”

“But taking cabs is a hassle,” Maggie said. “You don’t know where they’re going until someone flags one down. Buses have routes, and schedules. So they’re much more reliable.”

Sam stepped in front of a heavy-set woman toting a red umbrella, her pudgy face pinched with impatience. Turning to Robert, Sam shot him a wry smile.

“I do cut in line.”

A city bus pulled up, and when the doors opened, Robert, Sam and Maggie boarded ahead of the woman and made their way to empty seats in the back.

Robert glanced around the bus. “How can you tell if someone is dead? I mean, you two look the same as



everyone else.”

“That’s pretty simple.” Sam shouted, “Hey, you!”

An old man sitting next to an elderly woman looked up. Both Maggie and Sam waved, but the old man just scowled and turned forward again.

“How did you know?” Robert asked.

“I didn’t.” Sam shrugged. “But if he wasn’t dead, he wouldn’t have heard me. Every now and then you catch someone eavesdropping on a conversation, or they make eye contact when you pass on the street.”

The three of them settled onto one bench, although Robert noticed that he couldn’t really tell if he was sitting.

“Do the living ever sense that we’re around?”

“Every once in a while you get a tortured soul that puts off such a foul aura that the living can feel him,” Maggie said. “Maybe even see him.”

Sam snorted his disbelief, but Maggie was adamant. “I saw a dead soul in New Orleans who was screaming and whirling around his brother like that Tasmanian devil in the cartoon. Evidently, the brother had been too drunk to drive, but he didn’t turn over his keys. He ended up crashing, and the dead man was pretty sore about it. The brother never knew he was there kicking up a storm, but a woman walking her little dog passed nearby. The pup backed right up onto the woman’s foot and piddled on her shoe.”

“That doesn’t prove that other *people* can sense our presence,” Sam argued.

“Okay, watch this.”

Maggie drifted up the aisle until she came to a woman holding a large shopping bag on her lap. Planting her feet apart, Maggie rubbed her hands together, then flexed her fingers like she was about to play the piano. She placed both her palms on the woman’s cheeks and actually let them sink into her skin. For a few seconds, her hands worked the woman’s face like she was kneading bread dough. Then she jerked away. The woman’s cheek twitched.

“Presto!” Maggie bowed at the waist.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam said. “How do we know she wouldn’t have twitched anyway?”

“That was kind of impressive,” Robert said.

As she sat back down, Maggie gave Sam a triumphant smirk. “Who hasn’t caught a sudden movement out of the corner of their eye, and credited it to a reflection or a shadow? And what about that itch between your shoulder blades that you just can’t reach to scratch? Maybe it’s someone you knew trying to get your attention.”

Once the bus reached the heart of the city, Maggie stood. “Let’s practice some maneuvers, shall we?”

Sam got to his feet, gave a tiny wave with his fingers, and simply vanished through the back of the bus.

Robert gasped. “What happened?”

“Oh, he’s just showing off.” Maggie motioned for Robert to position himself in front of the back doors on the bus. Once he was in place, Maggie told him to get off.

“Aren’t we going to wait for the driver to stop?”

“You can’t always depend on the bus or cab or train to stop where you’re going. So you just get off when you want.”

Robert stared at the narrow bus doors. “Just pass through.”

“That’s right.”

He balked.

“Oh, what?” Maggie chuckled, “Are you afraid you might scrape a knee, or get hit by a car?”

The niggling comment grated on Robert. He wondered if her husband Joe really planned on coming back.

Unwilling to be intimidated, Robert closed his eyes and charged forward. From behind, he heard the bus rumble away. He opened his eyes and found himself floating above the street.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Maggie said.

“Piece of cake, eh Robert?” Sam said as he jogged up to him. “Now let’s get back on.”

Because no one was waiting at the stop, the next bus didn’t slow. Maggie and Robert stood out in the street, so that when the bus drove through them, they would automatically be on board. Sam stayed on the sidewalk, intending to finesse a side entry.

The bus passed through Maggie and Robert. As the seats whizzed by, Robert watched Sam calmly step in from the side. But then the bus kept right on going and Robert found himself outside the back of the bus. He scowled as he watched it drive away.

Sam and Maggie slipped out to join him in the street.

“Don’t worry,” Maggie said. “We couldn’t do it the first time either.”

“It’s kind of like those moving sidewalks at the airport,” Sam explained. “It takes a little practice to get on and off.”

After Robert mastered boarding, and staying on a bus, they moved on to high-rise buildings.

“I prefer to do things the same way I did when I was alive,” Maggie told Robert as they walked into the lobby of a ten-story office building. “So I ride the bus, I take the elevator if I can. It gives me a sense of normalcy.”

“The problem is we can’t punch the elevator buttons,” Sam said. “So depending on your level of patience, it’s usually easier to slip through the elevator doors.”

“Or if you know where you’re going, you can go in and out the window,” Maggie said.

A man in a nicely tailored suit waited at the elevator. Robert scanned the tapered lines of the jacket, the professional tie, the expensive shoes – probably Bruno Magli. Dressing like that for work was all over for Robert. There would be no more crisp white shirts, no pouring over ties, or buffing shoes. He was really going to miss slipping into a newly-tailored jacket for the first time, and inspecting the lines in front of the three-way mirror.

Who knew what men would be wearing when he came back in seventy-five years. Dear God, he hoped it wasn't some one-piece leotard, or a shapeless white robe.

The man at the elevator paged through e-mails on his i-Phone. Robert totally understood how moments in time, even thirty seconds waiting for an elevator, were never wasted on idleness.

"Why so glum, Robert?" Maggie asked. "Does he remind you of your former life?"

"He sure does," Robert said. "I spent nearly every waking hour on my business. Marketing, strategy meetings, business trips. What will I do now?"

"Don't worry," Sam reassured him. "There's so much to do, you'll never miss your job."

"I doubt that," Robert said.

Panic washed over Robert again. Seventy-five years, maybe a hundred years of waiting, with nothing to do. No planes to catch, no conference calls. It felt like he'd been sentenced to life in prison.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"I need a drink," Robert moaned.

"Come on," Maggie coaxed. "You're taking this all wrong."

"No, I'm not," he said. "The only thing I've truly enjoyed about my life was my business."

"That doesn't say much about your family," Maggie scolded.

Slumping his shoulders, Robert stared at the numbers above the elevator light up as the car descended.

"I just want to find the nearest bar and drink myself into a stupor."

"Getting sloshed never solved any problems."

Funny, that was the very same thing he'd told Amanda, the next time their paths crossed.

It was nearly a year after Sherry McClintock's post party. Robert had flown the red-eye into LaGuardia, and was nearly dozing in the backseat of a cab when the driver growled. Robert glanced out the window to see Amanda strut into some bar in Midtown. How pathetic, the way his heart had strained like a dog on a leash, wanting just to be near the woman. He'd thought of her a million times, even flipped through magazines on the off chance she might be in an advertisement. But he'd never been able to track her down. And then there she was. He'd swiveled around to get another look at her through the back window of the cab.

He pounded the driver's headrest and told him to stop, but as soon as the cab drove away, Robert had second thoughts. Surely, Amanda was meeting someone - a boyfriend? Other models? What if they all ridiculed him? He tortured himself with worst-case scenarios, including a drink tossed in his face, before he finally yanked the door open and walked in.

The bar wasn't at all what he'd expected, no glitzy lights or loud disco music. It's only purpose was catering to

drinkers, with a long bar along one side and booths down the other. There wasn't even a jukebox, just a radio playing quietly beside the cash register.

That late at night, most of the barflies were slumped over their drinks. A boozier near the front door slid off his stool and shuffled toward Amanda, who was perched on her own stool midway down the bar. The guy slowed when he got closer, but before he could even open his mouth, she snapped, "Get the fuck away from me."

She hadn't even turned to see who it was. And she hadn't glanced hopefully toward the door when Robert walked in.

So maybe she wasn't meeting anyone. More confused than confident, Robert took a stool three seats away from her, noting the shot glass clutched in her fingers. She tossed back the amber liquid like she was in a drinking contest. Before the booze had time to hit her belly, she was signaling for another.

Once the bartender refilled her glass, he sauntered down to where Robert sat staring. Without taking his eyes off the woman, Robert ordered a Dewar's on the rocks. The smirk on the bartender's face challenged Robert to get farther than a "fuck you" from the bitch.

He downed half his drink for courage, then braced an elbow on the bar and turned.

"You know," he said, "this might not be the best place for a lady to be seen drinking like that. Someone might get the wrong idea."

Why had he thought she might find him gallant, or charming?

She stared straight ahead, checking him out in the filmy mirror behind the booze bottles. When she spoke, it was a loud, bust-your-balls brashness that everyone in the bar could hear.

"Why do men think they can start up a conversation with a woman they've never met just because they're in a bar?"

Robert kept his voice low and calm. "Actually, we have met. Amanda Litrell – right?" He swirled his scotch across the ice cubes before taking another sip. "I was at Sherry McClintock's after-show party."

The party certainly hadn't been the social event of the season. With her short-lived career as fashion designer in the toilet, Sherry McClintock had scuttled off to Europe to fade into oblivion. But fade, she did not. Instead, she fell in with a jet-setting crowd on the Riviera, met the emir of some Middle Eastern country, and became the wife of one of the richest men in the world. They were undoubtedly the most sought-after guests at the most upscale events worldwide. And suddenly, people who boasted that they had attended her one and only show were semi-celebrities.

With a slow turn of her head, Amanda looked down the bar at Robert, her eyes in a lazy half-mast. One eyebrow cocked up. Did she think he was lying?

Her voice dropped to conversational level. "And who are you?"

"Robert Malone." He gripped his glass, preparing for a second humiliation. "I own the Audrey's chain."

As expected, she snorted, rather unladylike, and shot her next Cuervo. "The king of cheap knock-offs. And what are you doing in New York?" The tequila caught up with her and she wobbled on her stool. "Trolling for more fashion ideas to rip off?"

Robert stood, stretching his chest up and out. Do or die time. "Why don't we move to a table where you'll be more comfortable while you insult me?"

Would she call him a gnome again? Was that when he'd get the drink in the face? Actually, she didn't have a drink at the moment. He hid his fear behind a slight smile.

"How did you ever come up with a name like Audrey's anyway?" She staggered off her bar stool. "Seems like Robert's Discount Mart would have been more appropriate."

She careened across the aisle and tumbled into a booth. Ever the gentleman, he blocked the view of her voluptuous bottom as she struggled to right herself.

"My mother adored Audrey Hepburn," Robert said once he slid into the booth across from her. "Unfortunately, the stores in our small town didn't offer the kind of fashions my mother wanted. Neither did the Sears catalog."

Amanda sneered. "Maybe the pages with the good stuff were in the outhouse."

Robert leaned back and relaxed. The woman was a viper, no doubt about it, but he realized her insults were meant to hide her own insecurities. He took a moment to drink in the gold lame camisole with the cowl neckline that displayed her magnificent breasts; the flecks of purple in her cloisonné bracelet that complimented her fuchsia mini-skirt; her blond hair pulled into a tangled twist like she'd just been wrangling in the back seat of a car.

"So, tell me," Robert said. "When you headed out this evening in that divine creation, were you intent on castrating the first man you saw, or is this a spur-of-the-moment thing just for me?"

"Are you always this sleazy?"

Robert laughed. "Why am I sleazy? Because I think you're gorgeous?"

"No, because you're trying so hard to pick me up. You sound like every other barfly."

"Actually, I'm too busy, and too tired, to spend time hanging out in bars." He turned to the bartender who was gaping at them as he rubbed circles on the bar with a rag. "Coffee?"

The guy nodded and gave Robert a lurid wink. Thank God Amanda missed it.

"Then what are you doing here?" she asked.

Robert leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. "The truth? I was on my way to my hotel when I saw you.



And I couldn't believe my good fortune at running across you again. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment."

The bartender set two cups of coffee down, then pulled his bar rag out of his apron and took a swipe at the table, hoping to catch some of the conversation. Amanda did not oblige. She sat staring into her mug until he left. Then she raised her head and Robert saw big tears pooling in her eyes.

"You remembered me from a year ago?" she whispered.

"Are you kidding? How could any man forget you?"

A renegade tear broke free and she quickly sopped it up with the corner of her cocktail napkin. Then she clenched her jaw. "Stop being nice to me."

"Why?"

"Because I just got treated like a piece of shit, and I'm not in the mood for some twerp like you trying to put the moves on me."

Robert blew the steam off his coffee before he took a sip. "What happened?"

Her lips clamped tight to keep from trembling as she searched Robert's face. What could she possibly be afraid of? That he might mock her?

She inhaled deeply and blew out the breath. "I couldn't get into Studio 54."

"What's that? A talent agency?"

The laugh she blurted out turned into a sob. "Where have you been? It's like the hottest disco in Manhattan. In the *world*."

"Ah." He nodded as if he understood. "And you didn't have a reservation."

Again with the look of horror, the bitter attempt at a laugh. "You are such a moron. There's no such thing as reservations. You wait in line for hours, and if the cretin at the door thinks he can hook up with you later in the bathrooms, he'll let you in."

"But you weren't sending those kind of vibes..."

“He let my friends Christy and Angela in. Then he clipped that fucking velvet rope shut right in front of me. Excluded me but not my friends!”

Robert wished he had the nerve to slip into her side of the booth and pull her into his arms, but Amanda had already turned her humiliation into anger. She dug fuchsia-colored fingernails into the top of the table.

“It’s not fair,” she snarled in a hoarse whisper. “I’ve worked just as hard as they have. And I’m sick of people telling me my hips are too wide, my breasts are too large. What they really mean is they don’t want a woman who looks like a woman. They want some skinny bitch who eats Saltines and then barfs before she steps out onto the runway.”

“Maybe your agent isn’t sending you to the right places.”

A tear dripped onto the table and she finger-painted with it, her head bowed. “I don’t have an agent.”

Bells rang. Birds sang. Robert tumbled like a pubescent teen with his first crush. All he could think about was how much he wanted Amanda. But not that night. She was too vulnerable, and too soused.

“Look.” He abruptly stood and fished his money clip out of his pocket. “I’m staying at the Empire—”

Her head jerked up so fast a tear flew off her chin. Seething anger burned in her eyes. “How dare you...”

“—and I have to be up at the crack of dawn for a commercial we’re shooting in one of their ballrooms.” He laid a twenty calmly on the table to pay for the coffee. “Why don’t you come by tomorrow and meet the director, Frank Chambers. Maybe we can all go somewhere for lunch.”

With every ounce of will power he possessed, he walked out of that bar.

\* \* \*

The elevator doors whooshed open. Robert lumbered inside and stood in a corner.

"Don't start second-guessing your decision, Robert," Maggie said. "Cryonics was the right thing to do. Now you have to learn to adapt."

Sam agreed. "You have to think of this as retirement. A lot of men have trouble coping with their free time at first, but believe me, you're going to love this opportunity."

"Most retirees live on a fixed income," Maggie said. "So they spend their golden years picking and choosing. We can save for a trip to Italy in two years, but next summer we won't be able to rent the lake cottage. You, on the other hand, have been given carte blanche to go anywhere you wish, first class."

"Think of all the knowledge you'll garner over the years," Sam added.

The elevator doors opened. After the others stepped out, Robert shuffled along behind.

"I'm not going to go back to school," he said.

Rising on her toes, Maggie got right in his face.

"Stop sulking. You sound like one of my grandchildren."

She passed through the door of an insurance agency and was gone.

Sam offered Robert a sheepish grin.

"She can be a bit brutal," he said, "but she's right. You've got to get over your disappointment. There's nothing you can do about it now."

After passing partway through the door, Sam glanced back at Robert.

"Let's go take a header out of a sixth floor window. Maybe that'll make you feel better." He winked and disappeared.

Robert decided to suck it up and get on with it. Later, he'd ditch these two and go find something to do.

Standing close to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the insurance office, Sam gazed down.

“Okay, raise your arms over head, like you’re going to dive —”

With a bump of her rump, Maggie tried to knock Sam out of the way.

“He’s just kidding,” she said. “It’s hard to explain, but you see the sidewalk, you think it, and there you are.”

Robert closed his eyes and visualized the trash receptacle next to a parking meter. When he didn’t feel any difference, he pressed his eyelids tighter, but nothing happened. He opened his eyes to tell Sam it wasn’t working, and was shocked to find himself standing in the trash basket.

Next, they transported from one end of the block to the other.

Maggie didn’t seem to be holding a grudge over Robert’s surly attitude. If it had been Amanda, she’d have given Robert the silent treatment for the rest of the day, at least.

“Let’s step it up,” Maggie said. “See that church spire in the distance? Let’s see who gets to the top first.”

An instant later, Robert found himself hovering high in the air right next to the steeple. When he looked down, the shock made him attempt to throw his arms around the spire in a bear hug.

Ever the clown, Sam pretended to dangle from the side by one hand, while the other fist beat his chest King Kong-style.

“Hey! I’ve got an idea,” Sam said. “Let’s go check out the Rutherford Art Museum. They’ve got a new collection in the basement that doesn’t show until the first of the month. We can be the first to view it.”

How many times had Robert dragged himself through the High Museum in Atlanta for one of Amanda’s many charity benefits? At least at those, he’d been able to network with other bored husbands. And drink. What was the point now?

After spending an hour meandering through the museum’s basement, where most of the paintings were still in bubble wrap, Sam and Maggie decided to tour the museum upstairs. They stopped to read every stinking

plaque at every single painting. Robert was about to run screaming from the building when Sam stopped at the picture of Amanda.

They were in an alcove labeled pop culture. There were a couple Warhols, a Peter Max, the photo of Marilyn Monroe standing over the grate with her white dress blowing up, Farrah Fawcett in the red maillot. And right next to Betty Grable glancing over her shoulder, was Amanda in the champagne-colored gown. She lounged back on a chaise with one arm draped over her head. Her lips had been exaggerated as though they were swollen slightly, her eyes were dazed, her hair tousled as though her lover had just walked away.

Robert had often wondered what she was thinking at the moment the photographer caught that sated smile. He'd never been able to convince himself that her thoughts were of him.

That photo shoot had been quite different from the first time Amanda agreed to model an Audrey's fashion.

It was the morning after he'd happened onto her in the bar drowning her sorrows in tequila. He was amazed when she showed up at the Empire Hotel where he had a crew shooting a commercial. Unfortunately, Amanda's irascible attitude was with her as well.

"What's going on here?" she'd demanded as she glared past Robert to the set behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder at the runway that had been erected, the paid actors posing as photographers, and the women who strutted to the end of the catwalk. Of course, the women weren't modeling designer originals; they were dressed in ready-to-wear from Audrey's.

"That woman in the pink pantsuit can't be taller than five-two," Amanda carped. "And who did the woman's hair in the black evening gown?"

"That's the whole point." Robert had calmly explained. "All women want to look beautiful, even if they're short or

have frizzy hair. Don't they?"

Amanda had practically snarled, "I suppose."

How could she not agree? She'd just been lamenting to him the night before how unfairly the modeling industry treated her.

He touched her arm. "You could be part of this, too."

She jerked away with such wrath that for a second he thought she might slap him. "And what? Be the token blond bimbo in your freak show?"

When Robert caught up with her in the lobby, she did take a swing at him.

"How dare you," she sputtered.

"Stop it!" he demanded, gripping her arms. "Just calm down and listen to me."

The moment he turned her loose, she folded her arms tightly across her chest, her lips pinched in a scowl. At least she hadn't stormed out the door.

"I want you to be *the* Audrey's girl. The featured model wearing our top-of-the-line fashions. You'll be the close-up when we fade to black, the model in our magazine ads. You'll be my celebrity endorser, my Cheryl Tiegs, the face every woman can identify."

With every word he spoke, he watched the lines of her face soften. Her arms slowly unfurled. He closed the deal with one last zinger. "Look, you want to be a model - so model."

Grudgingly, she chose a sapphire blue gown that fit like a glove. Her first couple passes on the catwalk were awkward at best. There was no exaggerated flaunt of the hips, no haughty swagger in her shoulders. But as the actors flashed their cameras, and the extras murmured their approval, she loosened up. On the final take, she strutted with a confidence begging to be released. And when she tossed her head over her shoulder to give the director one last pout, the camera captured the essence of Amanda. She was indeed the Audrey's Girl.

\* \* \*

“Va-va-voom,” Sam said as he leered at Amanda’s picture on the museum wall. “Come to papa.”

Clearing his throat, Robert said, “That’s my wife.”

Sam chuckled. “You wish.” He turned to Maggie for her dig at Robert, but she wasn’t laughing. She merely nodded.

Swinging his head back to the picture, Sam said, “Wow! No wonder you want to come back. I assume she’s a member of the Cryonics Center, too.”

“No.” Robert didn’t feel the need to reveal how much Amanda had ridiculed him for joining the center.

“Well, at least you got to spend 28 years with her,” Sam said with a wag on his eyebrows. “That’s more than most men get.”

Robert huffed a breath out through his nose. “I heard a quote once from Carole Lombard, about her marriage. She said ‘Clark Gable is no Clark Gable’. Amanda’s beautiful, but she doesn’t have that va-va-voom you’re talking about.”

Sure, she’d come on like a sex goddess in the beginning, with the screaming and clutching at Robert as though she were in the throes of an earth-shattering orgasm. But after a while, he recognized her orchestrated performances as rewards. She doled out her affection as payment for full-page ads in magazines, or as a thank you for a new bauble.

When he gave her that 10-carat marquise diamond pendant for their first anniversary, she performed oral sex on him for the first time.

As the years went by, he learned not to trust any of her squeals or groans.

\* \* \*

“Okay, Robert,” Maggie said. “Time for the big finish. We’re going to teleport back to the Cryonics Center.”

“Raise your arms, point your fingers to the sky like you’re Superman,” Sam instructed.

“Don’t listen to him,” Maggie grumbled. “Think about some place in the center, like the surgical suite. We’ll be right behind you. If you don’t make it, just take a bus.”

Robert closed his eyes, and visualized the freezing chamber where his body currently laid, the temperature slowly dropping. When he opened his eyes, he was right beside the chamber.

Sam and Maggie appeared almost instantly.

“That was easy,” Robert said. “Where should we go now?”

“Sorry, pal.” Sam crinkled the corner of his mouth into a frown. “That was pretty much the whole tour. Maggie and I are still on duty until the first of the month. You know, in case another temp comes in.”

“You’re welcome to hang out with us,” Maggie said. “Once my time is up, I’m going to Savannah. They have a haunted house tour that I’ve been dying to check out.”

She waited with anticipation for Robert to respond to her ‘dying’ comment.

Instead, he turned to Sam. “And you’re going to college.”

“Not any college. Stanford. Participants will be discussing whether bioengineering is the route to take for nanotechnology.”

“Geez,” Robert said. “And I thought Savannah sounded boring.”

Sam and Maggie tilted their heads together and rolled their eyes.

“You’ve got to get out of business mode,” Maggie said. “You don’t have work hours anymore, no one is waiting for you to make a decision, the economy will not rise or fall at your bidding; you’re basically a nobody now. So you better find something you enjoy doing.”

Jamming a fist into his hip, Robert glowered down at Maggie. “You’re the one who keeps telling me I’ve got all the



time in the world. So why don't you back off and give me some time to adjust to this?"

"You're absolutely right," Sam said, stepping between the two of them. "Why don't you cruise around town some more, practice what we showed you. Surely there were times in your life when you caught yourself saying: 'If I had the time I'd...' what? Read books, go to every Mets game, learn another language?"

"Exactly," Maggie said. The woman was not easily intimidated. In fact, she seemed oblivious to Robert's little outburst. "If you spend a month in the Smithsonian, so what?"

"Wow," Robert said in perfect deadpan style.

'Okay, how about this." Maggie held out a hand to stop him. "You were into clothing, fashion. Why not pick your favorite designer and go hang out at his shop. You can watch his people come up with new ideas, or see someone create a new dress."

A glimmer of hope broke through Robert's depression. He actually could go to any designer house in the world now. He could go to all of them. And the autumn/winter fashion weeks were coming up. He could attend all four, starting with New York in February, hitting London and Milan and ending with Paris in March.

His imagination cranked up. Not only could he attend the shows, he could go behind the scenes, hang out in the dressing rooms, see the supermodel Gabriella buck naked if he wanted.

Relaxing his eyebrows, Robert hoped Maggie hadn't noticed the leer on his face. Especially after he'd made such a big deal about her strip club comment.

"One last thing," Sam said. "Our December meeting is in New York. You should definitely plan to attend. You'll be the guest of honor since you are the newest member."

"Oh, swell." Robert scrunched his face at the prospect of meeting a bunch of old codgers.

"You must come," Maggie insisted. "The temps are your only network of friends now. You'll be glad to have them as the years go by."

"It's not important yet," Sam said. "But eventually, you'll want to be present at all meetings because you never know when something might break in technology. You don't want to be late when they thaw you out."

"Yeah, okay," Robert said with a wave of his hand. He was tired of arguing with these two. "Maybe I'll go home first, see what Amanda's doing."

Robert was sure she had big plans for a memorial service for him, some elaborate final performance for the grieving widow. Plus, he wanted to be there when his attorney, Martin, gave her the bad news.

Poor Martin. Stuck with one last unsavory task. Remorse flickered for an instant, but Robert shrugged it off. That's what an attorney was for, to handle the dirty work, and Martin had made a small fortune off Robert over the years. Let him earn his severance check.

"Let me just warn you about going home," Maggie said. "It's a lot tougher than it sounds. You see your family grieving and you can't do anything to ease their pain. Or worse, they're *not* grieving."

She paused to give Robert a moment to grasp the implication, but Robert didn't expect anyone to grieve. Well, maybe his daughter, Rachel.

"If your business is successful," Sam said, "you're hurt that they're getting along without you. If the business starts to slide, you're frantic to get things back on track."

"You see your children, your grandchildren make mistakes, and you're powerless to help."

Sam snorted. "You find out things you don't want to know, or things you wish you'd known twenty years earlier. I checked in on one of my colleagues and found out he was surfing the 'net for young boys. Very disturbing."

“But you both went back,” Robert countered. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“No one’s saying you shouldn’t,” Maggie said. “We all go back. But it’s rarely what we want to see.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Robert was the first to board the flight to Atlanta, although soon enough, a businessman claimed the same first-class seat Robert occupied. He stood. It didn't matter. The flight attendant wasn't going to interfere, and he wasn't uncomfortable standing.

For all the walking he had done since leaving the Cryonics Center, his feet weren't sore. He hadn't slept; he wasn't hungry. His only concern was time. How was he going to fill seventy-five years?

He pondered Sam's question: What had he always wished he had time to do? He wasn't into watching sports. Sightseeing, travel, that whole tourist thing held no lure. Go back to school? Learn a new language? Boring. Reading books posed some major problems. He couldn't pop into a library and take a book off a shelf. If he read an e-book, it would be over someone's shoulder.

The truth was that anytime Robert had wished for more time, it was to squeeze more business into a day. He hadn't taken many vacations with his family. He didn't have a circle of friends with similar leisure activities. In fact, he couldn't think of any friends at all. Maybe Martin. Interesting how his only friend was also his attorney.

Martin was an ace at negotiating real estate contracts with failing shopping centers in need of a new anchor store. He'd also come to Robert's rescue on personal problems, like the skiing fiasco in Utah, or when his daughter, Rachel decided at the age of fourteen that she wanted to be emancipated.

The first person Robert called when he found out about the cancer was not Amanda, but Martin. True to form, Martin had objectively walked Robert through his options: go public with Audrey's and re-distribute the stores as franchises, or turn the privately-owned corporation over to Rachel. Martin

advised Robert to limit any inheritance to his son Robbie, and offered to act as executor to Robbie's portion, rather than Amanda.

Amanda's share of the estate had seemed a bit too generous for Robert, but then Martin always had a soft spot for her. All she had to do was stick out that bottom lip, or let her crocodile tears pool in her eyes, and Martin obliged.

When Robert became a member of the Cryonics Center, his relationship with Martin cooled, especially when Robert retained Jackson Burke to write up his Living Will and Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. Robert tried to explain that Jackson specialized in that type of law, but Martin was miffed. And when Robert chose Anne from the center as his health care agent instead of Amanda, Martin vehemently objected.

He just didn't get it. If Amanda knew an autopsy would botch Robert's plans for revival in the future, she'd be the first to demand one.

\* \* \*

Atlanta boasted several 'old money' neighborhoods like Druid Hills and Buckhead. Amanda wanted a Buckhead address, and if she couldn't live right on West Paces Ferry, she certainly had insisted on Tuxedo Park.

How strange for Robert to step off a MARTA bus at the corner of Valley Drive and West Paces, and walk the rest of the way home with a brigade of cleaning ladies.

He stood for a moment at the end of the long driveway, wishing he had half the money he'd sunk into that gothic revival monstrosity, all in the hopes that with a prestigious address, Amanda might fall in love with him.

Passing through the front door, Robert took in the two-story foyer with its Italian marble floor. He made his way past the sitting room, the game room, the study, the formal

dining room. How many rooms did the house have that Robert rarely set foot in?

Comfort had never been Amanda's goal. She wanted the house to be featured in Architectural Digest, and she didn't stop spending until it was. Who could have guessed that once she reached that lofty goal, she would sink into a depression that only cream puffs and cheese blintzes could relieve. She must have gained another fifty pounds before Robert had a guest room on the pool level renovated into a small gym.

When he didn't find Amanda in the kitchen, he made his way up the back staircase and down the hall to the master bedroom. He heard the shower running and poked his head through the glass door. The sight of Amanda was so shocking that Robert jerked his head back through the glass as though he'd accidentally wandered into the wrong house. He gazed through the frosted glass at her leg propped up on the tile bench while she shaved. Yes, that was Amanda. Robert slipped back into the shower for a closer look.

Her thighs were more taut than when he'd first met her. He knew she'd lost weight, but when had she done all this? Had he really been spending that much time away from home?

Even her breasts looked rebuilt. She'd had no desire to breast feed either Robbie or Rachel, but during her pregnancies, her breasts still swelled to gargantuan size; and once they shrank back, they were forever marred by stretch marks.

When she straightened to allow the water to rinse her leg, he saw how high and perky her breasts rode on her chest. She'd had them reduced. That was nothing short of a criminal offense.

Her stomach flattened into a classic washboard, and all that excess flesh from pregnancy was gone. Her upper arms and shoulders hinted at muscles. This wasn't just diet; she had to be working out for hours to sculpt that figure.

Evidently, she'd hired a personal trainer. An image of some sleazeball in spandex, rubbing his sweaty body next to Amanda's, pissed Robert off. The dirtbag should have seen her after Rachel was born: the rolls of sagging fat, the thighs that slapped against each other when she walked. The figure Robert had worked so hard to promote had been utterly destroyed.

She'd been the Audrey's girl; her picture in every fashion magazine from McCall's to Mademoiselle. He'd even thrown good money on ads in Vogue knowing those readers would never lower themselves to shop at Audrey's. But he'd done it for Amanda.

After that first photo shoot at the Empire Hotel, Amanda had agreed to dinner. She babbled about the other models who missed their marks causing yet another retake. She groaned about her aching feet from so many trips down the catwalk. But Robert caught the glimmer in her eyes. She was finally one of the girls. By the end of dinner, he was holding her hand.

And when the advertising agency provided him with layout proofs, he hand-delivered the boards to her apartment so she could see that her photo was by far the most prominent. She threw her arms around his neck and crushed her lips against his.

The day Mademoiselle hit the newsstands, he bought her a copy from the vendor on the corner. Her hands shook as she flipped through the pages. And after studying the spread forever, she looked at him with tears in her eyes.

Then she dragged him up to her apartment. He'd barely gotten the door closed when she was pushing his jacket off his shoulders, and tugging at his belt. They went at it right there on the living room floor, moaning, clawing, grunting their lust like animals.

He wondered if she'd been faking even then.

\* \* \*

Wrapped in a plush towel, Amanda strolled into their bedroom. Robert followed, sinking into a chair to watch her step into a black lace thong. She ran her fingers delicately under the front panel to smooth the edges, then peered over her shoulder at the mirror to check out her perfect buns. She was still putting on a show.

Robert remembered times, especially after they were married, when she would prop a leg onto the chair he was sitting in, giving him a quick peek at the hidden treasure between her thighs before slowly drawing a stocking up her leg. She would dust her breasts lightly with powder, swirling the puff around her nipples, and then bend to drop those wonders of nature into a lacy brassiere. It was like a striptease in reverse that drove him wild.

By the time she was dressed, he was hard as a rock; but of course she pushed away any advances, insisting that he not muss her makeup or hair. He usually finished himself off in the shower.

He'd like to give himself a little personal attention right now, watching her stretch that black jersey dress over her thighs. She hadn't worn anything that sexy in years.

"Mourning becomes Amanda," he muttered.

The tasteful Crane's vellum announcement of Robert's memorial service was wedged into the corner of her mirror.

She reached into the cup of her bra to plump her breasts. Her *reduced* breasts.

Robert sadly shook his head. "You shouldn't have."

As she clacked down the marble stairway, she pulled her cell phone from her purse. Robert pressed his head against the telephone to see who she was calling. Somewhere a phone rang several times before a sullen, groggy voice grumbled, "What?"

Robbie.



Amanda's face locked into a smile. "Are you all packed? You need to call a cab by ten-thirty if you're going to make your flight."

"I'm in fucking bed, Mother. So you can knock off the fucking good humor bit." It sounded like Robbie rolled to sitting. "What time is it?"

Her smile morphed into a sneer. "You promised you'd come to Atlanta. This is your father's funeral, for God's sake. I sent you the ticket. I have a driver coming to Hartsfield to pick you up. All you have to do is catch a cab to LaGuardia." Her voice rose to a higher pitch with each sentence. She ended in a whine. "How will it look if you're not here?"

There was a pause on the other end, followed by Robbie sucking in a breath of air. A cigarette? Or his first inhalation of the drug de jour?

"He's not dead, so why do I need to come home for your little charade? You can pretend this is a funeral, but sooner or later people are going to find out the truth."

She escalated to screeching. "You promised you would come!"

"No, Mother. I said I'd think about it. Now when was the last time I thought about anything and decided to do it? Never?"

Amanda slumped into the Louis the Fourteenth chair in the foyer. Why was she so surprised? Robbie was twenty-six and still hadn't worked a day in his life. Why should he? She sent him a monthly allowance, to say nothing of the million and a half she'd 'invested' in a condo for him in Battery Park.

How much had she shelled out over the years to bail Robbie out of scrapes with school officials, duped girlfriends, and the police? The way she squandered money, she'd go through her share of Robert's estate in ten years. Would she end up having to sell this house?

If she cut Robbie loose, she'd be quite comfortable living off her interest, but if she let Robbie keep eating away at the

principal—?

“I just think you could show your father some respect—”

“Respect?! And this coming from a woman who called him a loser and an imbecile, right to his face!”

Amanda massaged gently between her eyebrows to keep the muscle from contracting into lines. “I was angry. He was dying and I couldn’t do anything to save him.”

My God, her voice even cracked when she said that. She may be too old for modeling, but she had a promising career in Hollywood.

“You found out he was going to freeze-dry himself and keep most of his estate.”

She scraped her teeth across a corner of her freshly-glossed lips, debating. “I told you if you didn’t come home, I was going to withhold your November allowance.”

Robbie scoffed as he blew out smoke. “Don’t threaten me, Mother. You’re so bad at it. And listen, when you transfer the funds, you better add a couple extra thousand. I had some unexpected expenses.”

He hung up.

By the time Amanda got to Harrison’s, she’d stopped fuming. After expelling one last breath of frustration, she painted a smile on her face and stepped inside the restaurant.

There sat Martin, at the bar. Big Surprise. Amanda had no doubt set up a meeting to find out if she was going to be filthy rich, or just independently wealthy. She let those hips do the talking as she swaggered toward Martin.

He swung off his barstool looking quite dapper. When had he stopped buying his suits off the rack? And were those Italian shoes? Martin was definitely the anal-type—too preoccupied with business to be bothered with personal appearance. For years, Robert swore Martin’s closet was filled with identical blue suits, white shirts and striped ties.

As Martin ushered Amanda through the restaurant, his hand settled on the small of her back. Did she find the

contact as revolting as when Robert touched her? She probably wanted to slap Martin for his insolence, but fought the urge—at least until she found out what sort of loopholes he'd found in Robert's Trust.

Martin held her chair, telling her how lovely she looked. She tilted her head back and graced him with a smile.

"Don't fawn over the woman," Robert muttered. "Can't you see how she's playing you?"

The smile on Martin's face twitched a bit at the edges, like the plaster he'd used was about to crumble. He must have made arrangements earlier, because a cocktail waitress magically appeared with a fresh cocktail for Martin and a glass of wine for Amanda. Good thinking. Did Martin have some small talk rehearsed while he waited for Amanda to get some wine in her? It was going to take more than a little merlot to get her through this.

The color in Martin's cheeks had faded to a pasty white as he slumped into the chair opposite Amanda. Slowly, he wrapped the fingers of both hands around his glass in supplication.

Reaching across the table, Amanda touched a palm to his white knuckles. "Looks like the meeting with Jackson Burke didn't go too well."

Oh, yes. Robert had done the right thing, turning over his final arrangements to Jackson Burke. If he'd let Martin handle the trust, Amanda would have somehow cajoled him into getting the terms changed to her advantage. He'd seen her do it plenty of times when Robbie needed bailing out.

The only question was how: the helpless damsel in distress, the ball-busting wench routine, or had she thrown caution to the wind and used the sexy vixen approach? Dear God, had she gone so far as to sleep with Martin?

Amanda pried his fingers off the cocktail glass. "Martin?"

Oh, boy. Was she going to toss Martin's cocktail in his face? Very dramatic. That would probably get her a mention

in Peach Buzz, the celebrity column in the Atlanta newspaper.

“The man’s good, Mandy.”

Mandy?

“He’s a genius.” Martin squeezed her hand. “And we’re screwed.”

He let the finality of his statement hang for a second before he continued. “Our intention was to contest the validity of the trust. Claim that there was no proof that Robert would ever return, or that he was of unsound mind at the time he had the trust drawn up. But Jackson Burke has a video Robert taped, and he looks pretty damn sound. He also slipped in a no-contest clause to the original document, and as far as I can research, it’s good.”

“What does that mean?” Trying to feign calm, Amanda sipped at her wine.

Martin gazed right into her eyes. Good God, how many drinks had the man had that he was willing to face her down? Right now, his balls should be receding in protective mode; he should be scoping out the nearest exit.

Once Amanda set her glass back down, Martin continued. “If a judge agreed that there was no ascertainable beneficiary—no Robert anymore—or that Robert was indeed incapable of making decisions, the judge would find probable cause and nullify the trust. But if someone contests, and the judge does not agree, according to the no-contest clause, the beneficiary who challenges is disinherited.”

Amanda didn’t understand all that legal mumbo-jumbo, but she sure picked up on the magic word: disinherited.

Her voice cawed, “What?”

Martin fanned her with his hands, trying to keep her from coming out of her seat. “I’m sure they put that in there for Robbie. Sort of an all or none clause. You can challenge, but if you’re unsuccessful, you’re out—with nothing. Being disinherited can be a powerful psychological deterrent.”

Martin took a long pull on his own cocktail, no doubt savoring the flavor before he sprinted for the door. "Like I said, the guy is brilliant."

Robert took a bow, even though Martin was probably referring to Jackson Burke.

Now it was Amanda's turn to gulp her drink. Bet she wished she had something stronger. She'd probably like to blame the scene she was about to cause on drunkenness.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised," she sighed. "This is so like Robert. I wonder if the whole point was the hope that I would challenge. If the media got a hold of the news, I'd be branded as a heartless gold-digger like Anna Nicole. Or that bitch who scammed Paul McCartney."

"Robert's not that smart."

Hey!

"Are you kidding?" Amanda said. "Remember when I asked him to drop his damned exclusive clause in my contract? Do you have any idea what I might have earned in endorsements? But he couldn't stand the idea that I might make more than he paid."

"Well, there isn't anything in the trust about that. Maybe you still could."

"What am I going to endorse now? Hormone replacement therapy? Depends?"

"Come on, Amanda. You're still a beautiful, vibrant woman." Martin reached under the table.

What the hell? Robert slipped his head through the tablecloth. His attorney had his hand on his wife's thigh; and she was letting him!

"Look at all the cosmetic companies with their rejuvenating facial creams. Or weight loss programs."

Under the table, she laid her hand on top of his. It was about time the true Amanda showed herself. Robert watched to see her manicured claws dig into Martin's knuckles until he dragged his paw off her body. But she guided his hand farther between her thighs and squeezed!

“You think someone will pay for a testimonial about how, with the right man, a woman can do anything. Even lose a hundred and thirty seven pounds?” She giggled.

Martin gave her a big smile. “We could show before and after pictures of both of us. You in a moo-moo and me in a dorky wool blend suit.”

Just like that, she reached across the small table and grabbed Martin’s tie. She literally pulled him out of his seat, rising up from her own chair as well, and planted a deep lingering kiss on his mouth.

Queasiness washed over Robert that he hadn’t felt since those first moments after his death. His chest felt tight, and a high-pitched squelch rang in his ears.

He’d never seen it at home growing up, but he’d watched enough movies, he’d heard enough songs to know what he was seeing. Love.

He ran. Through the cut-glass doors of Harrison’s, across the parking lot, and up Peachtree Street; running as hard as he could to get away from what he’d witnessed. Questions tumbled over each other: How? When? And the most painful of all: *Why Martin and not me?*

## CHAPTER SIX

Exhaust-belching trucks and careening cars flowed beneath Robert like a polluted river. He stood on an overpass of the northern section of the beltway, miles from Buckhead. The setting sun perched just above Marietta to the west. Had he run all this way? He didn't feel the least bit winded. Only defeated.

After debating the possibility of finding a cab this far from the city, he began aimlessly walking. He killed hours at a sleazy strip club featuring girls with too much belly fat and sagging breasts. All of the strippers came out for the finale, strutting and squeezing to Donna Summer's 'Last Dance'. More like last chance for the remaining drunks to slip dollar bills into panties, while fumbling fingers drifted clumsily toward restricted areas and got slapped playfully away.

Then it was on to the Waffle House on Piedmont where drunks hung out after the bars closed down, combating the booze with scrambled eggs and raisin toast.

It was still dark when Robert ended up back at his home in Buckhead, but the birds were tweeting restlessly in the trees, so dawn was near.

Even though he knew what he would find, Robert tortured himself by climbing the spiral staircase to the master bedroom.

Amanda lay nestled in Martin's arms, her lips just inches from his neck. Robert wedged himself between them, wanting to feel her soft, warm breath against his own skin. He couldn't.

Thinking back through nearly 30 years of marriage, he searched for clues to when their affair might have started. Certainly not in those early days. Life was too hectic and they were on crazy schedules.

He remembered one night that first spring when they were all flying red-eyes back to Atlanta. Martin had been in

Des Moines closing a deal on a 25-thousand square-foot property. After spending two weeks in Springfield, Robert was coming home for the weekend. And Amanda had been fighting wind and rain in Savannah for two days on a photo shoot.

Robert and Martin met in a bar on concourse D at the airport and waited for Amanda's flight.

"It's amazing," Robert was telling Martin. "Women *love* having a man in the store. She tries on a dress and I tell her to turn around so I can get the full effect. Or she likes a skirt but she thinks maybe the blouse is too plain. So I grab a scarf and drape it around her neck. That personal attention means everything."

Martin sipped scotch, his bleary eyes unfocused. "And what do you say if she asks you if the dress makes her look fat?"

"Oh, I tell her the truth. But in a good way. Like —'sweetheart, your husband might not want you struttin' your stuff for all the other men out there'. They don't take it so personally when it comes from me. I'm like their physician."

"Doctor Feelgood," Martin mumbled and downed the rest of his drink. "I'm dead on my feet. How much longer do we have to wait—"

At that moment, Amanda burst into the bar like a typhoon and paused before letting a magazine, the hefty Best of Vogue issue slip from her hands. The slap on the floor drew attention from all the other weary travelers in the room—mostly men.

Newspapers rustled, chairs creaked, conversations stopped.

Then she slowly eased down in a squat, allowing her short skirt to ride up her thighs. Flipping her hair to one side to increase visibility, she squeezed her elbows to her chest to thrust out her breasts, and scooped up the magazine.



Robert loved the show—God knows he'd seen it a hundred times—but Martin huffed in disdain.

At the table, she bent to offer air kisses to Robert, one stiletto heel rising behind her in a coquettish pose. Robert took advantage of her public display to rub a hand down to her ass and squeeze. She never rejected his overtures if she had an audience.

Martin however, refused to stand and offer his cheek. Instead, he rifled the papers on their cocktail table like she was late for an important meeting.

Once she was sure the barometric pressure had stabilized in the room, she took a seat.

"My God, the humidity was brutal in Savannah," she said breathlessly.

She even fanned her cowled silk blouse, then fluffed her professionally-tangled hair with polished nails.

"We sat in the trailer all morning playing cards," she said, "waiting for a break in the rain." She inhaled a deep breath, her breasts rising to peaks. Then she blew out with dramatic flair, her head wobbling in that 'what's a girl to do' shake.

"Then it looked like it was starting to clear so we raced out to the beach. You can imagine how hot it got the moment the sun came out, but Dominick started shooting like crazy. Five minutes later, it was pouring rain again. My hair was a wreck, the dress was toast. And we were back in the trailer in our robes, playing cards again."

When it was apparent that Amanda would be rehashing her day for a while, Martin stood.

"Perhaps we can continue this in the car?"

As they strolled to baggage claim, she jabbered about how the sunlight had played perfectly off her hair. And while they waited for her bags, she chattered about the perfect sunset, and how she was sure Dominick had captured her essence.

Martin went ahead to look for the driver, and he was sitting in the front seat when Robert and Amanda climbed

into the back of the town car.

By then, Amanda had worked herself into such an aroused state that she pulled Robert on top of her and drove her tongue deep into his mouth. He'd sat motionless, anticipating how far Amanda might take things. If he reciprocated in any way, she'd stop. Almost like his touch was the catalyst that turned her off.

Unfortunately, Martin growled to clear his throat, and turned in his seat to address them both.

"I'm heading to Memphis tomorrow night for a meeting with Charles Henderson at McNamara's." He rustled a sheaf of papers when Amanda continued to nibble on Robert's ear. "Amanda, you have an appearance at the Springfield Audrey's Friday, and then you join Robert in Anderson for the ribbon-cutting ceremony on number twenty-five."

Her lips parted in a wicked smile as her hand slid between Robert's legs; her eyebrow twitched in a taunt. Then, the moment Martin got out of the town car at his apartment, her performance stopped. Had she been teasing Martin as much as Robert, even then?

No, in those days, she had no interest in Martin. She might not have actually been in love with Robert, but she loved what he could do for her, and she showed her appreciation.

His mind roamed again, like scanning for a clear channel, and another more recent episode came to mind. He'd come home late from a business trip to find Amanda crying in their bedroom, a scrapbook on her lap.

"What's wrong?" he'd asked.

"This." Amanda shoved the book at him. "This is what your daughter thinks of me." On one side of the page, Rachel had pasted pictures of her friends with little captions about their clothes, their hair. Across from these pictures was a snapshot of Amanda. She had fallen asleep out by the pool, wearing a massive caftan. The hem of the shapeless dress had ridden up her thigh, and the caption read: Jabba the Hut. There were also cut-out arrows pointing to the rolls

of fat at her neck, to the pasty white leg spread across the chair. Each arrow had a single word: Yuck! Gross!

He felt so sorry for Amanda that he pulled the scrapbook out of her hands and closed it.

"She doesn't mean that. She's just being a teenager. Showing off for her girlfriends."

"But I am gross," Amanda wailed as she jumped to her feet. "I've tried, Robert, honestly I have. But I just can't get the weight off."

He found himself assuring her that her size did not matter, even rubbing his hands along the pillowy layer of fat on her back, down to her humongous hips. Suddenly she was clamoring at his pants, begging him to make love to her. At first he'd said he was too tired, not in the mood. But she'd unzipped his fly. "I can get you in the mood."

Christ, she was ready to go down on him. How long had it been since she'd done that? Her desperation turned him on. His desperation made him ashamed. But that didn't stop him.

"Let me just get the door," he'd whispered.

And there was that goddamn Robbie, staggering down the hallway.

"Where the hell have you been?" Robert asked.

When Robbie told him to fuck off, Robert went ballistic, charging down the hall after him. Robbie backed away, dropping a set of car keys. Robert picked them up. They were to Amanda's Jag.

"You took your mother's car? Jesus Christ, Robbie you don't even have a driver's license anymore. Do you know how much trouble you could get into..."

"She said I could." Robbie spat the words at him before he pushed open his bedroom door and slammed it in Robert's face.

Amanda came tripping out of the bedroom. When she saw how angry Robert was she just shrugged her shoulders. "If I hadn't let him, he'd have taken it anyway."

Robert wanted to slap her. "Don't you understand the liability here? If he has another accident, and hurts someone, kills someone, who do you think pays?"

She gave Robert her classic smirk. "Insurance?"

He twisted the keys in his fingers to keep from striking her. "Must you always play the dumb blond? Geez, Amanda."

"What?"

"Go see Martin. Maybe he can explain it to you."

"That's always your answer," she'd screamed. "Talk to Martin."

Everything seemed to tumble into place then, as he lay nestled between his wife and his best friend. She *had* gone to Martin. And he had offered her what Robert would not. Comfort. Acceptance. Love.

All this time, he'd figured it was Rachel's scrapbook that had finally goaded her into getting back in shape. But it wasn't the pictures. It was Martin.

At first light, Martin woke up. Robert leaped off the bed before Martin pulled Amanda into a tight squeeze. A sensual moan vibrated in the back of her throat.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Great." She rolled on top of Martin, the sheets slipping away from her naked shoulder.

Their intimacy was yet another affront to Robert. Even when he and Amanda first married, she never stayed to cuddle in bed. She always said she didn't want to be seen without makeup, or with her hair mussed. She didn't seem to mind this morning.

She lowered her head to kiss Martin, her tangled blond hair falling into his face. What? No brushed teeth?

"You know what I decided?" she said. "I'm glad we don't have to go through all that legal hassle. And we don't have to hide anymore, pretending nothing is going on."

With both hands, Martin combed his fingers into her hair, pulling it away from her face and tucking it behind her ears.

“Me. too.” He sounded genuinely relieved. “I want everyone to know I love you.”

Amanda’s smile weakened and she rolled off. Her head flopped onto her pillow. Martin raised up on his elbow, and draped a leg across hers. “You’re worried about telling the kids, aren’t you?”

“It’s not Rachel so much. But what about Robbie?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that.” He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. How could she stand having him stare so closely with nothing but thin wisps of eyeliner she’d had tattooed on years ago. “Maybe it’s time we weaned Robbie off his allowance.”

Sheer panic broke out on her face. “What?”

“It’s time Robbie learned how to take care of himself. He’s twenty-six, Amanda.”

What he really meant was that because of her leniency, Robbie was a total waster. From the day those kids were born, they never cried for more than five seconds before she dropped whatever she was doing to whisk them into her arms. At night, she kept both kids in bed with them. Called it the family bed. Well, there was no room for Robert in that bed.

“Your whole financial picture has changed here,” Martin said. “Robbie was given a specific inheritance, and from now on any monies he receives will be from that account, not yours.”

“Also...” Robert watched Martin’s leg tighten against her thighs, locking her down. “I want to send Doug Bailey up to New York immediately to evaluate Robbie. If he’s as heavy into drugs as we think he is, Doug can determine the best course of action. If Robbie needs to be institutionalized—”

“Institutionalized!” Amanda tried to buck Martin’s leg off, but he held fast.

“Hang on, now,” he said. “Some of the biggest celebrities in Hollywood have checked into rehab centers at one time or

another. You know that. Robbie might not be able to kick his addictions alone.”

Amanda tried to interrupt again but Martin pressed a finger to her lips. If Robert had ever tried that, she would have chomped it off and spit it at him.

“Once we get Robbie clean and sober, I’ll find him a job – on Doug’s recommendation. It may take him a while to get on his feet, but we’re not going to provide a free ride anymore. We’ll monitor his progress and when we think the time is right, we’ll let him fly solo.”

Dear God. Martin even opened his palm like he was letting a little bird go. What an idiot. Hadn’t he learned anything about Robbie in the past twenty-six years?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Robert stood in front of the art deco apartment building in New York City's Battery Park. A doorman wearing a deep burgundy waistcoat with gold braided epaulets jerked open the glass door and a woman carrying a briefcase burst out onto the street. Immediately, the doorman dashed to the curb, tweeting the whistle around his neck. A cab swooped over, and the woman was in and gone in seconds.

According to Amanda, the building was filled with young professionals eager to make their mark in the business world. She actually thought these up-and-comers would be a good influence on Robbie.

He shook his head as he passed through the brass elevator doors and drifted up to the twelfth floor. Once inside Robbie's apartment, Robert froze to take in the disarray.

Some kid was passed out on the sofa, a beer bottle tilted in the crook of his arm, the remains of the beer dripping off the boy's elbow onto the leather cushions.

The coffee table was piled with empty beer cans; an uncapped bottle of vodka sat half full. Ashes overflowed a saucer, and some of the cigarette butts looked like they had been stubbed out right on the glass tabletop. There were pot stems and seeds scattered amongst the ashes, and pills strewn about. A candle had been left burning; the wax had drizzled onto the glass and over the side where it had puddled and dried in the plush carpet.

The kitchen was illuminated by the refrigerator door standing wide open, dirty dishes were piled in the sink, empty food containers littered the counter. Robert was certain the garbage overflowing the basket reeked. The place was prime for infestation. Didn't the tenants' association ever check these units out?

As he passed the bathroom, he glanced in. Towels and dirty clothes had been pushed to the walls to make a path to the toilet that was sprinkled with pubic hairs and urine stains.

There was no path in the bedroom, just strewn clothes everywhere. Robbie and some girl lay sleeping, the sheets a tangled mess. It was obvious the bed had not been made in weeks. Good Lord, with all the money Amanda sent, couldn't Robbie shell out the cost of a cleaning service at least once a month?

The girl looked like a tramp, her tight blue jeans ripped in strategic places, her arms swathed in bracelets. She hadn't even taken the time to remove her high-heeled ankle boots before collapsing on the bed. Her camisole was so loose that one of her breasts spilled out; a tattoo of a snake's head lay perched on top, with its forked tongue licking at her nipple. Where her top separated from her low-slung pants, Robert saw the snake's body continue down her belly and into her jeans.

He forced his eyes away.

Robbie lay flat on his back, steadily snoring through his gaping mouth. A sudden reflex caused Robbie to choke and he coughed so hard it woke him up. He wobbled to sitting. Then with his head between his knees, he hacked until he produced a blob of mucus that he tried to spit into another overflowing wastebasket. It hit the floor.

And Martin thought he'd be able to rehabilitate this pig? Fat chance.

All the coughing woke the girl. She opened bleary eyes smeared with make-up. "Shut the fuck up," she croaked.

Staggering to his feet, Robbie shuffled to the bathroom where he hacked out more phlegm.

Robert wished Amanda could see what all her coddling and pampering had done. For as far back as Robert could remember, she'd let Robbie get away with—he almost



thought murder, but thank goodness the other kid hadn't died.

When was that? Robbie must have been sixteen. Robert knew his son was drinking because he'd discovered whole bottles of booze missing, but he didn't realize how heavily Robbie was into drugs until the ski trip to Utah. Amanda and Robbie wanted to go to Vail or Aspen, but Robert was thinking of investing in some condominiums in Park City, Utah. To placate Robbie, he said both he and Rachel could bring a friend along.

The first day out, Robbie and his buddy Chaz were clowning around on a black diamond run. Chaz collided with a tree.

What a nightmare. Robert had been in the middle of a meeting with the lawyers and real estate agents when he was called. Amanda had been off shopping and couldn't be found. The ambulance was just screaming in when Robert arrived at the hospital. Paramedics leaped from the back, juggling contraptions to keep Chaz alive.

Robert only remembered bits of the doctor's report: head injuries - coma - drugs in the boy's system. All Robert thought about was *lawsuit*.

He instructed the doctor to make Chaz a top priority. He called Martin and had him arrange to fly Chaz's parents out. Then Robert and the rest of his family waited at the hospital.

Robbie lasted maybe two hours. At first he'd just slumped into a chair and chewed on the yarn strings of his ski hat. But then he'd paced around the small waiting room mumbling to himself, his face winking in exaggerated twitches.

He got louder until he finally stopped in front of Amanda.

"Why are we hanging around here? The doctor said he's in a coma. There's nothing we can do. I say we go back and ski."

Robert jumped to his feet, charging Robbie. "Absolutely not! We're going to wait right here until Chaz's parents

arrive.”

“Oh, come on! That won’t be until midnight.”

“That’s right.” Robert’s head bobbed with anger. “So you might as well get comfortable.”

Robert remembered how Robbie never even looked at him. His eyes stayed right on Amanda. “I’m burning up in these clothes. Can’t we at least go back to the condo and change?”

Oh, no. If Robbie got the chance to go back to the condo, he’d park himself in front of the television and never come back.

“If you’d take that stupid hat off and quit stomping around, you wouldn’t be so hot,” Robert said.

Still glaring at Amanda, Robbie waited maybe another ten seconds for her to come to his defense. When she didn’t, he stormed out of the room. Amanda raced after him.

For about an hour, Robert tried to convince himself that they had just stepped outside to cool off. But then Rachel stretched her legs out in front of her and announced to no one in particular, “I guess they’re not coming back.”

In the back of his mind, Robert had known all along they would not. Amanda had taken Robbie back to the slopes.

\* \* \*

The slut from Robbie’s bed padded down the hallway, but before she plopped down on that nasty toilet seat, Robert followed his son to the living room.

First, Robbie pawed through the debris on the coffee table. When he didn’t find what he was looking for, he patted down the boy sleeping on the sofa. Still nothing. He went back down the hallway and stopped at the open bathroom door, his hands braced on each side of the jam.

“I need a fucking cigarette.”

The girl stood, and as she pulled her jeans back up, Robert realized that the snake tattoo went all the way down

to her waxed mons. It looked like the snake had slithered out from between her legs.

Robert staggered back at the same time the girl pushed Robbie out of the doorway and stumbled to the bedroom. She threw a crumpled pack at him before collapsing on the bed. Once he had a cigarette lit, he flopped down beside her.

“Jesus, Morgan, where did we go last night?”

Grabbing his wrist, Morgan pulled the cigarette close enough to take a drag.

“I don’t know, but my jaws are killing me. That goddamn Damien sold you some shit.” She flexed her jaw, massaging the hinges with her fingers. “I’m surprised I didn’t grind my teeth down to the gums.”

Robbie ran his tongue across the front of his teeth, then took another long drag on his cigarette.

“I need a drink.”

Evidently, that wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “You need to tell him you want your money back. Or he needs to comp you four more tabs. And not that shit. Who does he think he’s dealing with here?”

What a pathetic excuse for a man. Twenty-six years old, addicted to drugs and booze, a total mooch. Robert wished he was still alive so he could slap his son.

When he was twenty-six, Robert had just opened his fifth Audrey’s. He had contracts with fourteen different vendors supplying fashions and accessories. Forbes magazine had placed him in the top twenty-five of up-and-coming entrepreneurs. How could this wasted excuse of a son be cut from the same cloth?

The cigarette butt sizzled when Robbie dropped it into a beer can on the side table.

“So, what do you want to do today?”

The girl didn’t seem to remember what she’d been ranting about two seconds ago.

"Let's get something a little more mellow. Maybe some Oxycontin."

"Yeah, that sounds good. We can see what's on pay-per-view." Robbie reached his arms over his head to stretch, then kind of stopped right in the middle. "Hey, you want to get some X and watch porn?"

She blurted out a laugh. "That sounds like a total waste of time."

"Why?"

Her eyes rolled down to his crotch.

"No, really," Robbie said. "I'm feeling good."

She pressed her palm against his zipper and frowned.

"I'm telling you," Robbie insisted. "I just felt something."

Unbuttoning his pants, she slipped her hand in and massaged. "I'm not feeling anything but dough."

"I'm telling you, it was working just a second ago. With a little X and some porn..."

"Robbie, you could watch suck and fuck for hours and it wouldn't help this poor little nub."

Why didn't she just castrate him and get it over with?

The kid who'd been sleeping on the sofa came shuffling into the bedroom and flopped onto a pile of clothes in a chair.

"Fuck! What did we do last night? My head's killing me."

Smack in the middle of his forehead was a swollen blue knot with red streaks that looked like they might have bled. His eyes were black and puffy.

The girl laughed. "You look like you took a face dive."

He pressed gently on the knot. "No shit."

Robbie rolled away and Morgan's hand dragged out of his pants.

"I need a drink," he said.

The other two followed him into the living room, and after he took a hit off the vodka he passed it to the kid.

"No thanks, man." He wiggled his fingers at Robbie. "I need cab fare."

Without hesitating, Robbie reached into his pocket. "How much?"

"Give me fifty. I want to stop at Starbucks."

Robbie counted out three twenties. What an idiot. How many so-called friends did he have hanging on, bumming off him? How much was Amanda sending him each month?

The kid snatched the bills and left without so much as a thank you.

Morgan picked through the debris of pills on the coffee table, examining and rejecting them one at a time.

"Check your account again," she said. "We've got to find something better than this crap."

With a grunt, Robbie pulled his phone out of his pocket and slumped onto the sofa. His fingers typed for an instant before he shouted, "What the fuck?!"

Morgan leaned over his shoulder to look at the screen. "That's it?"

"She only sent me half."

"Christ, Robbie. You owe Damien more than that."

Robbie waved her away like a buzzing fly. "I know that!"

"Well, send her a text and tell her to cough up the rest."

Peering over his shoulder, Robert watched as Robbie scrolled through the rest of his e-mails. Among all the spam from J. Crew and Amazon was a message from Martin. Robbie's lips curled into a snarl as he read out loud.

"In accordance with the Trust Fund of Robert Alden Malone, a revised allowance has been issued to Robert Alden Malone Junior in the amount of..."

"That bitch!" Robbie screamed. "She doesn't even have the nerve to call me. She has her lackey send me a fucking bullshit letter."

Morgan sucked in a breath. "Jesus. You're fucked."

"No shit." Robbie punched in Amanda's number. He waited a couple seconds but she didn't answer. He left a message.

"Call me now."

He flipped his phone shut and sat with it in his palm, as though he expected an immediate response. Morgan even sat waiting, so fast callbacks must have been the norm. She was the first to get restless. Pinching at little nubs on the stems scattered around, she managed to fill a glass pipe with pot. She lit the bowl and smoked it all. Then wiping the sticky remote on her jeans, she turned on the TV.

Robbie waited maybe fifteen minutes before he called Amanda back, his message more terse this time. "What the hell's going on?"

Once it became obvious she wasn't calling back, Robbie chugged the rest of the vodka. Then he and Morgan slouched on the sofa and watched a variety of educational television programs. First it was some guy showing videos of stupid stunts. Evidently, kids had gotten way past riding in a grocery cart down a hill. Then it was a bunch of tattooed bikers modifying motorcycles.

Robert did his best to hover quietly and just observe. After all, like Sam and Maggie had pointed out, he had no pressing engagements, no appointments to keep. But after two hours, he couldn't stand the boredom.

He left Robbie's apartment in Battery Park and made his way over to Wall Street just to check his stocks. Then he wandered up to Fenton's to check out this year's jewelry styles, strolled over to Vera Wang's to see what they were up to there, and when he finally got back to Robbie's, they were still vegetating like slugs on the sofa.

The television program was about people making their way through some water maze of punching arms and sweeping blocks that knocked participants into the drink. During a commercial, Robbie called Amanda again. Was he doing that every ten minutes?

She must have gotten tired of his pestering and finally answered, because Robbie jerked upright.

"Why didn't you call me back?" he demanded.

Robert moved closer to listen.

"Your father's memorial service was lovely," she answered.

"How many assholes showed up for your fucking extravaganza?"

There was a pause before Amanda answered. "I take it you got the message from Martin."

"Hell, yes, I got that prick's e-mail. What the fuck's going on?"

"He's handling your estate now. I suggest you call him at his office—"

"I don't want to talk to that jerk-off," Robbie leaped to his feet. "I want you to tell me what's going on."

"I'm sorry, Robbie. It's out of my hands."

"Bullshit!" He hesitated for a moment, then hurled the telephone across the room. It shattered against the wall. "She hung up on me!"

He picked up the vodka bottle and smashed it against the same wall, leaving a dent in the plaster. Then he kicked the side panel of the sofa until his foot went right through the leather. Tumbling backwards, his arms windmilled and he hit the floor with a thud. He rolled, twisting his foot out of the guts of the sofa, then dove onto the coffee table, sending cans and bottles flying. He mopped up ashes and seeds with his shirt as he slid along the glass.

The first time Robert had witness his son throw a tantrum like this was way back when he was only five or six years old. It was Christmas morning, and Robbie was up before dawn, wanting to open his presents. He ripped the paper off each one as fast as he could grab them, barely noticing the item before moving on to the next.

Rachel was probably only four at the time. She sat on the floor playing with the ribbons, stringing Robbie's discarded bows onto her arm like bracelets. When she opened her first present and pulled out a little pink sweater with matching socks, she immediately kicked off her slippers and put on the socks. The static electricity she created when she pulled

the sweater over her head made her fine, blond hair float around her face like spun sugar.

Robbie finished opening his presents before Rachel was halfway through hers. That's when he went digging through the pile of wrapping paper, kicking toys aside, looking for something. He put his hands on his hips and pursed his lips at Amanda.

"Where's the Muskrat GI Joe?"

The smile on her face drooped.

"The store was sold out," she groveled.

He kicked an empty box and Amanda had to bat it away before it hit her in the face.

Leaping off the sofa, Robert grabbed Robbie's arm.

"That's enough, young man," he scolded. "You apologize to your mother right now."

But Robbie just screamed at her.

"That's all I really wanted for Christmas!"

Oh, sure, the one thing she didn't get. Robert told him to go to his room until he was ready to apologize for his behavior. The little brat punched Robert in the gut, then grabbed a fistful of branches and pulled the whole Christmas tree over. If Robert hadn't taken the brunt of the tumbling tree, Rachel would have been crushed underneath. And all Amanda could do was apologize to Robbie, promising to take him to Toys R Us the next morning to see if any GI Joes had arrived.

\* \* \*

"That goddamn bitch!" Robbie pounded his fists on the coffee table. "I ought to go down there and rip her fucking face off."

He rolled off the coffee table into the space between it and the sofa. With a knee and a hand, he pushed the table onto its side. The glass top wavered before falling onto the carpet. "Burn that goddamn house to the ground."



Bracing his back against the sofa, he shoved the black iron table across the fallen glass, scraping ear-piercing cuts in the surface. "I'd like to take her fucking credit cards and shove them right up her ass."

Morgan sat so quietly that Robert wasn't sure if she was scared or just bored by Robbie's tantrum. Pulling a knee up to her chest, she hugged her arms around it tightly.

"Maybe you *should* go down there." She rested her chin on her knee and squinted her eyes. "I gotta think mommy dearest has lots of jewelry."

"Oh, hell, she's got a fucking safe in her bedroom full of shit. I know there's stuff in there she's never even worn."

"A safe, huh?" Morgan rocked slowly. "You know the combination?"

Robbie looked up from where he sat on the floor. "Why would I need a combination? Half the time the fucking thing is sitting wide open."

Sliding her leg down, Morgan straddled his head with her thighs. She massaged the tension from his neck with her fingers. "So, if you were to go pay mommy a visit you could just waltz right into her bedroom and fill your pockets with diamonds and rubies?"

That was rich. Martin's big plan to set Robbie on the path to success was about to blow. Robert knew it was sadistic, but he just had to be there to see it all happen.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The look on Amanda's face when she opened the front door was worth every miserable second of the past two days Robert had spent with Robbie and Morgan. At first, Amanda's eyes brightened, thrilled to see the son she had adored for twenty-six years. But then fear crept in as she realized she might have to deal with this unexpected problem alone.

She never could stand up to Robbie. He was nearly ten years old when one of his teachers suggested he be tested for ADD. Amanda was actually relieved. She would put him on Ritalin and calm him down, end of issue. But his pediatrician said Robbie didn't need medication, he needed boundaries. When he overstepped those boundaries, he should have his privileges taken away.

"Like his toys, or the television." The shrillness in Amanda's voice rose as she related the visit to the doctor. "Can you imagine the fit Robbie would pitch if I took away his computer games?"

Instead, she searched until she found a doctor who would basically sedate Robbie. It made their lives much easier, but that was probably the beginning of Robbie's addictions.

Bet Amanda would like to pop a Ritalin in Robbie's mouth before she let him into the house.

Breaking her gaze from Robbie, she turned to Morgan. As Amanda's eyes scanned up and down, her lips sank into a frown. Her nostrils flared. Not that Robert could blame her. The girl looked like a hooker in her spandex Capris and droopy tank top under a ratty fake-fur jacket. Robert hoped Amanda would get a peek at the snake tattoo.

In all the time he'd been at Robbie's apartment, he hadn't seen either of them shower or brush their teeth or even run a comb through their hair. Did they smell?

Amanda finally managed a breathy, "What are you doing here?"

"I decided to come down and see if we can't straighten some things out."

Her hand shook as she held the door for them to come in. A meltdown was imminent.

"Can I get you a drink?" Amanda asked, then frown. She'd just offered her derelict son and his whore booze.

She quickly changed course. "Why don't you have a seat in the living room?" But then she immediately scowled. She didn't want their nasty body residue on her furniture.

"Or maybe you and your friend would like to sit out on the lanai. It's such a lovely day. And I'll..." She rubbed the makeup right off her forehead. "I'll go get us some Cokes. Or Sprite? Dr. Pepper?"

Without even waiting for a response, she bolted for the kitchen. Robert followed.

She snapped open her cell, her hand shaking as she punched keys.

"Martin," she hissed in a half whisper. "Robbie's here. Yes, at the house. With some slutty friend."

They jabbered back and forth like magpies. Martin suggested she get them out of the house by taking them to dinner someplace. He would join them. Amanda thought the idea was insane. Robbie had never had a predilection for restraint in public places. She wanted Martin to leave his office immediately and come home. He'd started this whole mess, and he damn well better help her see it through.

He agreed to be there within the hour. The color drained from her face. An hour alone with her dear, sweet Robbie?

"I guess we could drive over to China Garden and pick up some take-out."

Robbie and Morgan had worked out their plan on the flight to Atlanta. He would start an argument at dinner, then stomp out. Morgan would make sure Amanda didn't follow. He would grab all the jewelry from the open safe, shove it

into his duffle bag, then come back downstairs with both their bags and tell Morgan they were leaving.

She was supposed to ham it up a little, urging him to calm down, but he would insist and she would sigh and follow him. They would walk right out the front door, climb into the rental car and be gone.

He didn't think Amanda would do anything about the stolen jewels. How could she have her own son arrested? Morgan had badgered him about Martin. His mother might not take action but an attorney might. Robbie had insisted everything would be cool.

Robert hated to side with Morgan, but she was right. Martin would never let Robbie get away with all that jewelry. There was a million and a half in diamonds alone. Martin would know. He'd had the whole lot appraised as part of the initial trust/settlement of Robert's estate.

Martin had barely finished his hot and sour soup when Robbie asked, "Would you mind telling me how you came up with that bullshit figure you deposited in my account for this month?"

"Certainly." Martin calmly reached across the table for an egg roll and a small packet of hot mustard. As he squeezed the condiment onto his plate, he told Robbie what his total inheritance equaled.

"We've spread that amount over twenty years, with four lump-sum provisos for major life events: marriage, buying your first home, children."

"You're full of shit," Robbie said. "I want the full amount now."

"Not possible," Martin said, then dabbed his egg roll into the mustard and took a bite. "The front end of the agreement has a stipulation. The money allowance runs only for six months. If, during those six months, you have not successfully completed a drug rehabilitation program, any subsequent—"

“Rehab!?” Robbie shot out of his chair, sending it flying back into the wall. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Amanda whined, “Rob-bie.”

Robert had to laugh. Both Robbie and Martin held out their hands to cut her off.

And when Robbie stormed out of the room, Morgan was on it. “Just let him go. He’ll calm down faster if he has some time alone.” She turned to Amanda, then Martin, flashing the top of the snakehead on her breast. “So, have you looked into facilities in New York? I mean, for Robbie’s rehab.”

If Martin thought her interest was unusual, he didn’t show it. They’d only been chatting a couple minutes when Robbie appeared at the dining room entrance with a tall glass in hand. It might have appeared to be water to someone else, but Robert knew it was vodka.

“Morgan? Could I see you for a minute?” Robbie calmly took a sip as he waited for a confused Morgan to get up from the table. He led the way up the stairs to the bedroom they were sharing, quietly closed the door, then chugged a big gulp of the vodka.

She snatched the glass away. “Are you crazy? Why aren’t you following the plan?”

He answered between clenched teeth. “Because the safe is locked.”

“What? You said it was always open.”

“It was.” He reached for his glass. She hesitated before letting him have it back. He took another giant swig.

“I bet Martin told her to lock it, the fucking weasel.” Morgan paced in front of the chair where Robbie had slumped, his head lolled back.

He sounded a lot like Amanda when he whined, “Now what are we going to do?”

Shooing him like a gnat, Morgan closed her eyes and sucked in her bottom lip. What was she scheming? Surely, she didn’t think she could crack the safe. Or could she?

Another thought drifted through Robert's head. Did Amanda still keep the combination scribbled on a notepad in her vanity? More importantly, was Morgan smart enough to find it?

"You have no idea what the combination is?"

Robbie shook his head.

She looked thoroughly disgusted when she said, "Give me the car keys."

"What for?"

"I need cigarettes." She wiggled her fingers to move him along.

"Come on, Robbie," Robert said, knowing it was useless. "She's got a whole pack in her bag."

Without thinking twice, Robbie handed over the rental keys, then took another healthy drink. When he woke in a fog tomorrow, would he even remember giving them to her? Would he be surprised that she'd taken the car and bolted?

Robert followed Morgan down the back stairs, wondering if she would try and get a couple hundred dollars by cashing in Robbie's return flight ticket. He also wondered if she had her own key to Robbie's apartment. Maybe she planned to clean out his apartment, hock his plasma TV.

Once she'd slipped silently out through the kitchen door, Robert wandered into the study. Amanda was perched on Martin's lap, boo-hooing on his shoulder. If she knew how close they'd come to a real disaster, she'd be wailing a lot harder.

The sight of his wife and his best friend clinging to each other drove Robert outside. He stood under the portico at the front door for a long time, trying to decide what to do. Maggie and Sam had been right. Going back to visit family never turned out as expected.

Now, his only option was to go back to the Cryonics Center and hang around with those two until their stint as greeters was through. Then what? Go on a ghost hunt with Maggie? Take a class with Sam?

What a screwed up mess. This was not how his freezing was supposed to go. Why hadn't he just gone to sleep like Alex Darden said he would? Maybe the guy hanging out in the tank of liquid nitrogen with his body had the right idea. A self-imposed sleep.

Robert needed a drink. He wanted to talk to someone about this catastrophe. Hell, he wished he could just pound his fist or wring his hands!

He wandered around to the back of the house and watched the wind ripple the water in the swimming pool. He'd never been in that pool, never even dipped a toe into the water. The only time he'd even been out there was for Amanda's annual garden party.

The first year she hosted the event, she'd worn a stunning red bikini with a sheer cover-up with swirls of colors. So many guests showed up, Robert had seriously considered turning people away. But as the years went by, the cover-ups covered up more. And as Amanda's enthusiasm waned, the crowds dwindled.

No one ever swam in the pool then either, not even a drunken guest making a fool of himself. All those years of pool maintenance to keep forty thousand gallons of water clean—for who?

Well—Rachel.

He'd seen her a couple times swimming laps, or coming in through the lanai, her hair still wet. Now he realized it must have been a daily routine; she was so methodical, so driven that once she'd decided on swimming, she'd have been totally committed.

What a contrast between her and Robbie. Rachel was smart, confident, she had a business savvy that rivaled his when he was in his mid-twenties. And now that he was gone, she would do a fine job running the Audrey's stores.

There was no reason for Robert to take boring cruises or spend endless hours in museums. He could spend the next fifty years watching Rachel build the Audrey's corporation.

He remembered being stunned when Martin told him of Rachel's request—no demand—that he create the legal documentation for Rachel's emancipation from her mother and father.

She was only fourteen at the time, but her relationship with Amanda had deteriorated to screaming matches. And it was usually about Rachel's appearance. If she wasn't wearing combat boots, she had rips in her clothes that were held together with safety pins. One day, she wore all black, and her eyes were dark as a raccoon's. Then the next day, she'd be decked out in a poofy mini skirt, two different leggings, one stripped, the other polka dots, and black patent Mary Jane shoes.

Robert thought some of her combinations were inspired, but Amanda went bonkers. Especially when Rachel altered something Amanda had bought.

At first, Martin had tried to humor Rachel by pointing out that she had to be seventeen before the court would even hear her case. Even then it was doubtful that any judge would comply.

Undaunted, she asked Martin to look into alternatives, like adoption.

\* \* \*

Hours later, a light came on inside the house. Robert wandered back in to see Morgan tiptoeing up the stairs. Once she closed the bedroom door, she flipped on the light. Robbie was passed out in a chair, an empty vodka bottle wedged between his legs. She kicked his foot, and the bottle rolled to the floor.

Robbie jerked. "What the hell?"

"Wake up," Morgan said. "We've got a new plan."

He curled to his side and pulled his knees up, trying to get comfortable in the chair.



“Oh, no you don’t. We’ve got to work fast.” She tipped his head back and slipped a pill into his mouth. “This’ll get you going.”

Robbie stared up with bleary eyes. “Where’d you get that?”

“We’re in Atlanta, asshole. You can get anything you want.”

Whatever she’d given him, it seemed to work fast. He staggered to his feet and jammed his hands in his pockets.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I didn’t take your money.”

After a second glance at her fuck-me heels and tousled hair, his lips slid in a pout. “I thought you weren’t going to do that anymore.”

“Oh, for crissakes, Robbie. I needed some cash. Now are you ready to hear the plan?”

He flexed his jaw, and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Yeah. Let’s hear it.”

Her body quaked with a sudden giddiness. “We’re going into her bedroom, wake her up, and make her unlock that safe.”

“Are you nuts? What makes you think she’ll open it?”

“This.” Morgan reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a gun. It was wrapped up in one of those clear plastic bags newspapers were delivered in.

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah.” Morgan grinned. “My first trick was carrying it. Said he got off pointing it at chicks while they sucked him off.”

“He could have killed you!”

“Christ, Robbie!” Morgan shook a stringy strand of hair out of her eyes. “I had enough sense to make sure it wasn’t loaded.”

Some of the color returned to Robbie’s face.

“But here’s the best part,” Morgan said. “I jacked the gun when he wasn’t looking. I’ve got his fingerprints on the weapon.” She giggled as she tousled Robbie’s hair.

“So what?”

The grin on Morgan’s face vanished. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s go.”

Robbie tumbled back into the chair. “Jesus fucking Christ. You are nuts.”

“Come on. You put this to her head and I guaran-damn-tee you she’ll open that safe. And since she was going to know sooner or later that you took the stuff, what difference does it make how you get it?”

“I don’t know—”

But Morgan wasn’t really listening. “Can you see her face when you pull out this baby? I bet she’ll be real damn sorry she fucked with you.” She pranced, gripping the gun through the plastic and waving it around. “Come on, bitch. Hand ‘em over.”

God, this couldn’t be happening. Did Robbie really have the balls to hold a gun to his mother’s head? Didn’t he know Amanda kept a gun in her bedside table? What if Martin got to it first?

A sickening smile crept over Robbie’s face as he slowly rose to his feet. “She’ll piss her panties.”

“Yeah.” Morgan punched the air. “That bitch is going to be so sorry.”

She bobbed her head and Robbie joined in. They bounced on the balls of their feet as they pumped each other up with their idle threats. Amanda would think twice the next time she let Martin interfere, and she sure as hell would forget about that reduced allowance.

When Morgan thought he was ready, she shoved the gun into Robbie’s hand. “Let’s go.”

He started to take the gun out of the bag but she stopped him.

“Uh, uh,” she said. “Finger prints.”

She swung open Amanda’s door and swept her arm to invite Robbie in. He stood planted in the doorway, the gun pointed, so that when Morgan turned on the lights, his

mother would see his bad-ass self. God, he was such a moron.

## CHAPTER NINE

When Morgan flipped the light switch, the first person to bolt up out of the bed was Martin.

"What the fuck?" Morgan and Robbie said at the same time.

She wheeled on Robbie. "Did you know about this?" she asked him.

"No!"

Martin was already out of the covers, naked, and crawling over Amanda, reaching for the bedside drawer.

"Oh, shit!" Morgan hissed.

Oh, shit was right. Once Martin had Amanda's gun, it was over. He would call the police and have Robbie and Morgan arrested for attempted robbery. Even with Amanda's pleadings and tears, Robert doubted if Martin would let the two get away with their little prank.

In fact, Martin would probably do his best to make sure Robbie did some time. It could jumpstart the whole drug rehab plan. Robert smiled.

But suddenly, Morgan wrapped her hand around Robbie's. Robert heard the crinkle of plastic, saw Morgan wedge her finger into the trigger. There was a short struggle as she fought to swing Robbie's arm toward the bed. Then a single blast cracked in the quiet night.

Robert gasped in disbelief.

The gunshot woke Amanda with a start. She was faced away from the door, so when Martin groaned and slumped onto her, she was still groggy and didn't understand.

"Martin?" she grumbled, and pushed on his chest to roll him off. Then she drew a hand away, saw the blood and screamed.

"Jesus Christ!" Robbie shouted.

Amanda jerked her head around and froze. She stared at Robbie, at the gun, at Morgan, her mouth wide in shock.

Martin struggled to rise, and lurched again toward the drawer. Morgan yanked the gun out of Robbie's hand and fired again. Amanda's piercing scream wailed like a siren.

With quick strides, Morgan crossed the room to the bed.

"Shut up!" She pressed the plastic-covered gun against Amanda's temple.

"No!" Robbie shrieked. "What are you doing? You said the gun wasn't loaded."

"Well, it's a damn good thing it was. Did you see that prick dive? He was going for a gun." Morgan yanked open the bedside drawer and then nodded like she'd known all along. "He'd have shot us both, no questions asked."

Robbie began to tremble. "I don't think..."

"What did you think he was looking for?" Morgan snapped. "Condoms? He was feeling frisky and wanted to fuck your mother?"

Robert's thoughts seemed to crackle and spark, as though his mind could not compute what was happening.

Robbie stood nearby, quaking, blubbing, "Don't, Morgan. Don't."

Amanda sobbed and Morgan shouted at both of them to shut up. She pushed Martin's limp body away, then dragged Amanda out of the bed by her hair. She was naked, too. Robbie turned away.

"Congratulations, Robbie!" Robert yelled. "You happy now?"

Using the gun, Morgan pointed at a robe tossed on a chair.

"Put that on," she snarled at Amanda before turning to Robbie. "Get it together, you dumb shit. You just caught your mom fucking the dickhead that was going to send you to rehab."

"I know." Robbie wailed. Then using the heels of his hands, he wiped away the tears in his eyes. He turned on Amanda. "How could you? With Martin of all people? Jesus, Mother."

Amanda was too afraid to speak. All she could do was clutch the robe tightly to her waist. Blood from Martin soaked through the silk.

"Your husband's attorney." Morgan clicked her tongue. "That's like fucking his business partner. Or his brother."

"Did Dad know you were cheating on him?" Robbie asked. "Is that why he cut us off?"

"That's probably why he wants to come back," Morgan fueled Robbie's indignation. "He's hoping his next wife won't be a fucking whore."

Amanda's tousled hair swung from side to side as she shook her head, her face contort with anguish. And the longer she remained silent, the bolder Robbie grew.

"Were you fucking Martin to get more of Dad's estate?" Robbie hesitated, as though an idea was fighting its way to the surface. "Wait a minute. He was going to get the will thrown out, but you weren't going to tell me. You were going to keep it all for yourself."

"You bitch!" Morgan tossed in.

Amanda's voice was low and raspy. "That's not true, Robbie."

"Get over to that safe and open it up," Robbie yelled. "Right now."

Morgan waved the gun for emphasis.

After one last glance back at Martin's lifeless body on the bed, Amanda stumbled to the armoire, and the safe. She opened the double doors of the cabinet with trembling fingers.

Robert remembered when she'd insisted on cutting away the back of the armoire so the wall safe would open just above a shelf. That way, Amanda could spread out all her pretty baubles before choosing what she wanted to wear. She'd had halogen lights added so she could see the stones true colors before deciding.

For the first time in years, the shelves were cleared. And when Amanda pulled the handle on the safe, Robert could

see all the velvet trays and flannel drawstring bags tossed haphazardly inside, no doubt at Martin's suggestion.

"It's not what you think," she told Robbie. "Martin and I love..."

"Shut the fuck up!" Robbie screamed.

"Stop lying!" Morgan shoved Amanda so hard she tumbled to the floor. "You better just shut the fuck up before Robbie gets even madder."

Amanda seemed genuinely startled by Robbie's behavior. Didn't she remember all the times Robbie had lashed out against people he thought had wronged him? Like the time he turned in a science project that Amanda had done for him. The teacher gave him a failing grade, said she knew he hadn't done the work himself. He got mad and smashed the project right in front of the woman. But that wasn't enough for Robbie. The next day, when the teacher got to her classroom, she'd found all the tropical fish in her aquarium dead. Naturally, she accused Robbie. And Robert was sure he'd done it. But Amanda refused to believe her golden boy could do anything like that. Maybe she was finally getting it now.

A whimper distracted Morgan, and she glanced over at Robbie. He was quickly losing steam.

"Start filling that bag," she snapped. "You just became one rich motherfucker."

Robbie's face had a pasty hue; his hand shook as he unzipped the duffle bag. He pulled the top velvet tray out of the safe that had been wedged in at an angle.

Nestled on the black fabric was the David Yurman amethyst necklace Robert had bought Amanda when she accepted his marriage proposal. The next tray held several Chopard necklaces, another was piled with Unsworth and Baccarat bracelets.

"Jesus Christ!" Morgan gasped as she watched the jewels tumble into the bag. "I may have to keep a couple of those."

She snatched the Damiani coiled bracelet from its tray: ten diamonds alternating with black pearls to commemorate Robert and Amanda's first ten years of marriage. He remembered how Martin had insisted Robert buy her something special. But her arm was so fat, she had to have the coils reshaped so the bracelet would fit.

With his teeth, Robbie pulled open a drawstring bag and nodded for Morgan to open her hand. A cascade of rings flowed into her palm. Castaways that no longer warranted a slot in a jewelry tray.

Each twinkle of a diamond brought a little more color to Robbie's cheeks. And when he flipped open the lid on the Zambian emerald and diamond necklace, Morgan gasped.

"Dear God!" she chortled at Amanda. "You must have taken it in the ass for that one!"

Plucking it up gently with his fingers, Robbie gazed at the necklace. His shoulders tipped and his legs wobbled. He had to take a small step back to keep from falling. Was some fragment of reality finally sinking in? That particular necklace was insured by Lloyd's of London. Even if Amanda didn't go after Robbie and Morgan, the insurance company would.

The duffle slipped from Robbie's hand and fell to the floor. An instant later, Robbie dropped to his hands and knees and vomited on the white carpeting.

Was he finally realizing how this was going to end?

"Jesus, Robbie," Morgan said. "Don't barf on the goods."

Squatting down, Morgan jerked the necklace out of Robbie's clenched fist and tossed it into the bag.

"Why don't you take the bag and go start the car," she said quietly. "I'll grab our stuff."

She helped Robbie to his feet and gave him a nudge toward the door.

"No!" Robert yelled, running ahead, holding out his arms to keep Robbie from leaving. "Stay here! You can't be that much of a coward."



But Robbie's eyes had that dull vapid stare of someone who had shut down. Lowering his head, he trudged out of the room without a backwards glance.

The moment he was gone, Morgan grabbed Amanda's arm and yanked her to her feet.

"Hey!" Morgan yelled, turning toward the door so Robbie would be sure to hear. "What are you doing?"

Then she pulled Amanda against her, wedged the gun between them, and shot Amanda in the chest.

Robert cried out in horror. "No!"

Amanda's body started tumbling backwards, but Morgan grabbed her by the shoulders and acted as a counter weight, pulling Amanda down on top of her.

By the time Robbie dashed into the room, Morgan was struggling to get Amanda's body off.

"Jesus!" she grunted. "Your mom attacked me! She tried to get the gun away, and it just went off."

Morgan rolled slowly to her knees, then looked up at Robbie, her eyes actually tearing up, her lips in an exaggerated frown. "I'm so sorry, Robbie. I didn't mean for this to happen." She even bowed over Amanda lifeless body sprawled on the floor and brushed a lock of hair out of her face. "Please forgive me."

Furious, Amanda sat up. "What are you talking about? You shot me!"

She slapped at Morgan's hands before scrambling to her feet.

"How could you be so stupid?" Amanda shouted as she stomped toward Robbie. "Didn't you realize what she was going to do?"

But Robbie stared right through her.

"Why would she try to fight you?" he asked Morgan.

"I guess those diamonds meant more to her than you did. Maybe she thought if she got the gun, she could get her precious jewels back."

“Who do you think you are?” Wheeling around, Amanda charged at Morgan but instead of knocking her down, she passed right through her. The sensation made her so dizzy, she tottered.

She gripped her head, like she was trying to stop the spinning. Her eyes roamed from Robbie, to Morgan, and then at her hands. Shaking her head, she glanced back up and for the first time, Amanda saw Robert.

Her jaw slowly sank, her eyebrows tightened into a furrow.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, her hands flailing to wave him away. “You can’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, Amanda.”

“No!” she shouted. She swung an arm to club Morgan, but it never made contact. She screamed Robbie’s name but he didn’t hear.

With a groan, she faced Robert. “I can’t be dead.”

He shrugged and took a step in her direction to offer some comfort, but she backed away.

“You bastard!” she said. “This is all your fault!”

“My fault!? You’re the one who let him get away with murder.” Robert bobbed his head at the obvious pun.

“You think this is funny?” she screeched as she slowly turned her head to survey the carnage.

Robert wanted to cry. “No, I think this is a tragedy. Robbie’s whole life has been one big mistake.”

“Hey!” Amanda charged at him. “Someone had to take responsibility for our children. God knows you were never around to help.”

“Don’t give me that shit. I tried plenty of times to help. And you always overrode my decisions. Or cut me down. Made me look like an ass in front of my kids.”

“Oh, please.”

“Nothing I ever did made you happy.”

Amanda’s face scrunched into that familiar smirk she always used when she wanted to demean him.

“Like the Christmas tree,” he said. “You’d bitch if I didn’t help. But when I did, you always criticized how I hung the lights, or where I put the ornaments. Don’t you think I knew that you came along behind me and changed them all? And it was right in front of Robbie and Rachel.”

“I really don’t think Robbie hated you because you couldn’t decorate a tree.”

“He hated me because *you* hated me!” Robert jabbed a finger at her. “And in all these years, I’ve never been able to understand why. You cringed when I tried to touch you. You mocked me in front of our friends. Hell, you even criticized the way I wore my hair. You poked fun of the way I flossed my teeth!”

He swept an arm toward Martin’s body on the bed. “How does lover boy floss his teeth? Do you get all wet watching him flick last night’s roast beef onto the mirror?”

But she was no longer listening to Robert. Her sorrowful eyes stared at Martin’s bloody corpse.

“Speaking of which, where is Martin?” Robert looked around the room. Martin was nowhere to be seen. “Why, that lousy bastard. He took off.”

Amanda’s voice cracked. “What?”

“He’s gone. He didn’t even stick around to see what happened to you. Or he decided he didn’t want to spend eternity with you.”

“No.” She slowly shook her head, trying to make some sense of it. “He wouldn’t leave me.”

“Evidently he would. He’s not here.” Robert couldn’t resist. “Looks like all he was interested in was a good fuck, huh?”

Her lips pursed into a thin line and she raised her hand to slap him. Robert waited for more of her venom to come spewing out. But instead the corners of her mouth curled into sadness. As she slowly lowered her hand, her image began to fade.

"He loved me," she whispered, like she was trying to convince herself. Then her essence thinned to a mere wisp and she just disappeared.

Robert tried to keep his rage going, but defeating Amanda had been cruel. Guilt drove him from the bloodied scene. He staggered down the hallway to Robbie's room, unsure of what he could do.

Morgan stood in the doorway of Robbie's bathroom, towel-drying her hair. She must have taken a shower to wash off Amanda's blood. Robbie was back in a fetal position in his chair.

Dropping the towel, she padded over and pulled him gently to his feet. She pressed her naked body, and that disgusting snake tattoo, against him.

"Look," she said as she tightened her grip around his waist. "What's done is done. I wish I could take it back, but I can't. So you need to get a grip."

She quickly stepped into the capris she was wearing when they arrived, and absently-mindedly reached into her pocket. When she discovered another pill, she held it in her palm, like a lump of sugar for a dumb horse. Robbie snatched it.

Jesus, whenever Robbie struggled to the surface, this slut pushed him down again. When was the last time his son had had a lucid thought? Months? Years?

"That's better. Now let's get the fuck out of here."

Slinging the duffle bag of jewelry over her shoulder, Morgan raced ahead of Robbie, down the winding staircase, and through the foyer. She yanked open the front door and nearly ran into a police officer who looked like he'd been about to knock.

She yelped, and the policeman jumped.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "We got a report that a silent alarm was tripped at this address."

Behind the cop, Robert saw a cruiser in the driveway, the motor running, the driver's door open. A radio crackled

inside.

“A silent alarm?” Morgan said.

Robbie skidded to a stop behind her, panting from both the trauma and the running.

“Are you talking about the house alarm?” he asked between gasps.

“No,” the policeman said. “According to our records, there’s a trip alarm on a wall safe.”

Robert choked out a laugh. “Good ‘ole Martin. I always said he was a belt and suspenders kind of guy.”

The policeman slid a flashlight out of his belt and flashed it in Morgan’s face. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

Morgan flinched, turning her head to the side to avoid the bright beam. “Yeah, fine, great.” She began to close the door. “Thanks for stopping. Everything’s cool here.”

But the officer respectfully laid a hand on the door to keep it open.

“May I see some I.D.?”

Blue lights from three police cars swirled through the trees and across the manicured lawn. At intervals, the lights collided with the red beams from an emergency vehicle parked haphazardly in the drive.

Robert stood under the portico as Robbie and Morgan were handcuffed. He watched the familiar protecting of the head as his son was loaded into one police car, Morgan in another. The radios in the police cars sputtered with calls from dispatch and other officers in the area.

Through the open door, Robert heard shouting in the foyer before an officer burst out onto the porch.

“We’ve got a live one upstairs!”

## CHAPTER TEN

Robert had no idea how long he sat in the gray plastic chair at gate fourteen on concourse C, waiting for a flight that would take him back to the Cryonics Center. Around him, rolling carry-on bags burred on the carpeted floor, passengers hustled to their gates, intercoms announced departures, called for missing passengers, and warned those waiting not to leave their luggage unattended.

He'd considered trying to instantly transport back, just close his eyes and be there, but too many other disturbing visions clouded his mind.

He heard Amanda's name and glanced up at the television suspended from the ceiling. Headline News reported the breaking news that Amanda Malone, the famous Audrey girl, had been murdered. The television network used the famous photo of Amanda reposed on the chaise in the champagne-colored satin gown.

Then, as quickly as the image appeared, it was gone, replaced with a segment on some skirmish in a Middle Eastern country. By the time the news came back around in the next half hour, the network had footage of Robbie and Morgan, handcuffed, and being led into a police station. Bright camera lights illuminated Robbie's doped-up expression, and Morgan's defiant statement that she had nothing to do with the shootings. God, Robbie didn't even have Martin to cover his head with a coat, to insist that his client was innocent.

News crews had been dispatched to the Buckhead house, where cameras zoomed past the iron gates for a close-up of the house. Then an attractive brunette reported that Martin was struggling to survive two gunshot wounds in the ICU of Piedmont Hospital.

He was alive? An ache in Robert's chest flared. No wonder Martin hadn't waited for Amanda. No doubt he would have

spent eternity with her if he could. And he never would have abandoned her during that crisis. The realization made Robert feel like a heel.

Each half hour the story grew. Reporters had combed archives for photos of Martin. They'd chosen the picture of Robert and Martin at the dinner commemorating Audrey's twenty-fifth year.

Headline News even had wedding pictures. Robert stared at the image of him with Amanda in her Versace original. That day Robert was sure his every dream had come true. How had it all gone so wrong?

Suddenly, he heard Rachel's voice. *"I don't know any more than you do. I just want to get back to Atlanta."*

Robert glanced up at the television monitor to see his daughter trapped in a huddle of reporters, microphones with call letters waving in her face. She excused herself and attempted to push past the swarm.

As usual, she was dressed in an Audrey's fashion, taupe gabardine slacks with a teal blue silk blouse. When she became the head buyer of the corporation, she began dressing exclusively in company merchandise, even her shoes. Robert had teased her about her loyalty to the store. And Amanda was absolutely incensed.

One time, she cornered Rachel. "Why are you wearing that cheap knock-off when you could be wearing real Donna Karan?"

Rachel had smiled sweetly and patted her mother's cheek. "I wear Audrey's so *you* can buy DKNY."

And with those long legs and tiny waist, anything Rachel wore looked fabulous.

A news reporter blocked Rachel's retreat. "Who told you about your mother's murder?"

Another asked, "When is the last time you saw your brother?"

"What do you know about Morgan Hastings?" came a shout from the back.

Rachel raised her hands. "I understand your curiosity, but I'm sure the police can tell you much more than I can. Now if you'll please excuse me, I have a flight to catch."

Such control. Rachel was a master of diplomacy. If Robbie had been a disappointment, Rachel had been Robert's shining legacy. She'd been born with an uncanny sense of style. When other little girls were merely playing with Barbies, Rachel was designing fashions for her dolls. She'd mix the vest from a casual outfit with the satin skirt of an evening gown. She was dressing Barbie in boots and leggings long before it became a craze.

All Rachel had needed was the business skills to go with her talent. And Robert made sure she was groomed. He'd gotten her involved in the Audrey's empire when she was only fourteen. Even if neither Amanda nor Martin took Rachel's emancipation probe seriously, Robert had. He took on the responsibility of her education and career from that point forward.

Rachel didn't just follow daddy around, expecting the workers to respect her because she was the boss's daughter. She insisted on visiting manufacturing plants that contracted with Audrey's. She talked to the designers, the buyers, even the shoppers at different locations. The few times she made suggestions they were right on the mark.

By the time she graduated from high school, she was pals with two of his top buyers. They were calling Rachel, asking her opinion, sending her photos of new lines. When she wasn't working at his corporate headquarters in Atlanta, she was attending Georgia State's school of business.

Where Robbie had hated the constraints of school, Rachel loved the structure. She always studied. She'd wanted to be the smartest in her class. Like a sponge, she soaked up everything she heard, read and saw.

Robert flashed on the night he'd poked his head in her room to tell her lights out. He'd assumed she was studying, but her bed was piled with back issues of *Glamour*,



*Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue*. Shreds from cutout pages littered her covers. On the far wall of her room, she'd taped a mix-matched collage of fashion.

"No homework?"

"Done," she said without looking up from the page she was cutting.

"Don't report cards come out soon?"

"Two weeks ago, Daddy." Her lazy-eyed glance accused him of a parental blunder.

He ignored it. "And?"

"I told you I was getting all 'A's the last time you asked."

He'd beamed. "Better watch it. You'll be driving all the boys away if you keep that up."

"Good. Boys are stupid."

"Ah, but we're lovable." He'd taken another moment to check out her world. The pink canopy was gone, and he'd actually wondered if it now hung in her closet as a skirt. Most of the frou-frou Amanda had chosen was either gone or altered. The porcelain dolls from around the world had painted-on cat whiskers or handlebar moustaches. A dozen pair of shoes – black patent Mary Janes, silver slippers, pastel sandals – hung from a mobile in a corner.

Amanda was determined to make Rachel into the pretty little girl she'd seen once at the Fox Theatre during a performance of *The Nutcracker*. The young girl was adorable in her green velvet dress with white lace collar, a matching green velvet ribbon tying back her long golden hair. The child had nearly brought tears to Amanda's eyes as she crooned over the lace-cuffed socks and black patent shoes.

"Oh, Robert," she'd sighed. "I want to have a little girl just like that."

But Rachel just wasn't into frills. Amanda would buy ruffled blouses, and Rachel would pull the ruffles off and wear them wrapped around her neck like a scarf. If Amanda bought a matching sweater and slacks, Rachel wore the sweater with blue jeans, or the slacks with a camouflage

jacket. As a teen, she'd always dressed one step ahead of the trend.

The television camera panned back to show the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. So Rachel was in Texas, and coming home. Robert dragged himself up from his seat. The sun was up, glinting off a sleek silver jet parked at the gate.

After checking the arrivals board, he shuffled his way to gate fourteen, glancing at passengers along the way. Some wore haggard faces, like they weren't sure how much longer they could take the travel. Others had that cocky defiance as they chattered on their Bluetooths, like they were setting off to break another record, acquire another victory.

That's how Robert had felt. He'd always wanted to set the world on fire. So did Rachel. Standing at the wall of windows, he stared out at the empty tarmac and waited for Rachel's flight to arrive.

CNN was still hammering away at the story. They'd dug up lots of dirt on Morgan Hastings - alias Marie Harding. She'd been suspected of shooting her mother's lover when she was twelve year old. There was speculation that the boyfriend had abused little Marie, and when pornographic photos of her had been found, the charges were dropped. She'd been arrested for soliciting sex twice, once in Miami, once in New York.

Only Robbie could get hooked up with someone that sleazy. The way he and Morgan had talked, she was turning tricks when they met.

By now, an assistant DA in Atlanta had been interviewed. Some young hot-shot fresh out of Harvard assured the public that Robbie and Morgan would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Would Rachel even make contact with Robbie? Surely, there was no love lost between the two of them. Rachel must have resented all the attention Amanda had given him. All

the broken toys, the crashed computers, the lost cell phones – replaced without so much as a reprimand. And the cars!

Rachel's first car was a VW Beetle. Robbie's was a BMW. And when he totaled it within the first month, Amanda had turned right around and bought him a Mercedes. The next time he wrecked, he also got a DUI and a suspended license. Robert finally put his foot down, forbade Amanda to buy Robbie another car. That's when he started driving her Jag.

\* \* \*

The boarding door at gate fourteen swung open and Rachel was among the first passengers to exit the gangway. Robert was amazed once more by his daughter's stunning beauty. She wore her blonde hair combed straight back and clasped at the nape of her neck, accentuating the sleek cheekbones, the radiant skin.

She carried the prerequisite briefcase, but refused to wear a Bluetooth. Said it made her look like a Gap employee. As she walked toward the escalators, passengers scurrying to their flights stepped aside to let her pass. A flight attendant slowed to take in Rachel, then smiled. More than one businessman stumbled or bumped into another passenger. Robert regretted not trying harder to persuade Rachel to model.

The first time he'd thought about it, she was only sixteen. He'd invited her on a business trip to New York. Their suite at the Marquis had a sitting room, and Rachel was perched on the sofa, her legs crossed, sketching on a pad. He'd come out of his bedroom to urge her to get some sleep, and she'd held up the pad. "What do you think?"

She'd been working on a pants suit with a calf-length jacket. The long, sure strokes of her pencil, the clean lines of the outfit, showed amazing talent.

Even with no make-up, her face glowed, her slight smile assuring him the design was good without being told. She

had that teasing tilt of the head that cameras loved. He was embarrassed to notice how she'd filled out. Suddenly she was not his little girl anymore. It was the last time he shared a suite with her.

\* \* \*

Rachel flipped open her cell and hit speed dial. With all the background noise, Robert could not hear who she was talking to, but her face softened immediately. "Hi. I just got in."

Her head tilted down, nestling against the small phone as she discussed her flight. Then her head popped up.

"You did?" she said. "On Headline News?" Her head nodded as she listened. "I know. I don't know why I thought I could avoid this. I'm sure they're waiting right now outside security. I might as well get it over with."

A pale rose color tinted her cheeks. "Early supper sounds great." Her blush deepened to crimson when she said, "I missed you, too."

A boyfriend. How had Rachel managed to keep that bit of news from Robert?

In high school, she'd always thought the boys were too immature for her. She always insisted she was way too busy for their shenanigans. It looked like she'd finally come around.

A gaggle of reporters was indeed waiting for Rachel. The moment she stepped out of the corridor at the main terminal, cameras flashed, and voices yelled for attention. She let the jackals swarm, bombarding her with questions.

"When was the last time you saw your brother?"

"Did you have any idea he was capable of this kind of violence?"

"How long has he been abusing drugs?"

Rachel raised both hands to fend off the reporters. When they quieted, she said, "I love my brother, Robbie. I'm not defending what he did, or even his lifestyle these past few years. All I know is, I can't begin to explain his actions, or encapsulate his life, in a ten-second sound bite for the news."

With that, she pushed through the crowd and marched for the nearest exit.

Robert rode beside Rachel in a cab, pondering her statement to the press. She was smart to express her personal feelings for Robbie, that whole family-loyalty thing. Yet she'd succeeded in distancing herself from his behavior and his actions. He liked that little zinger at the end. The media always thought they could make perfect sense of any situation in ten seconds or less.

When the cab exited the expressway at Tenth Street and headed up Piedmont Avenue to Ansley Park, Robert reacquainted himself with the established neighborhood. Most of the homes in Ansley Park cost a million plus. He'd learned once at some benefit that the neighborhood was the first built in Atlanta for automobiles. The winding streets curved around small parks, instead of running in a grid to accommodate streetcars. Its location in midtown had kept it trendy, and expensive.

So who was this new boyfriend? An attorney? A surgeon?

His house was a brick traditional with a professionally landscaped lawn. And the fact that Rachel had her own key spoke volumes on the relationship. The foyer had a small bamboo fountain and what looked like one of those Asian serenity gardens. Through double glass doors, Rachel strode into a cozy living room, set her briefcase in a chair, and smiled when she saw wine chilling near a cluster of floor pillows in front of the fireplace.

A clink caught her attention and she wandered into the kitchen. A woman stood at the counter arranging cheese on

a plate, her straight black hair hanging halfway down her back. She sensed Rachel's presence immediately and turned. The tight tee shirt she wore only accentuated her flat chest. The low-slung slacks had no hips to grip.

"Hey!" She smiled, her Asian eyes crinkling. "You made good time."

"Yeah. I kept it short and sweet with the press. Although I doubt if that's the last time I get cornered."

The Asian woman reached out an arm and Rachel slipped into a comfortable embrace.

"No," Robert groaned, taking a step back. "No."

Rachel tilted her head down. The Asian woman raised her chin. Their faces aligned. Their lips drew close.

"No." Robert squeezed his eyes shut tight, envisioning a tall, stainless-steel Dewar at the Cryonics Center.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Silence surrounded Robert. Cautiously, he raised his eyelids to darkness. Ahead, he saw the familiar steel Dewars that held the preserved bodies like his.

Spreading his arms wide, he embraced the closest cylinder in a hug, and leaned his cheek against the metal to feel its coolness. He felt nothing but heartache.

A jumble of thoughts clamored for purchase in his head, like jump cut edits that were so popular in commercials.

The sudden bang from the gun. Rachel's lips pressed against the Asian woman's mouth. Morgan's hand in Robbie's pants. Amanda's golden hair flying across her face as she fell to the floor. The snake tattoo slithering up Morgan's belly. Robbie's trembling hand holding the gun. The splatter of blood on the wall. Rachel's hand entwined in silky black hair.

Most of all, Robert recalled that last desperate look on Amanda's face. Was it the final realization that she had failed as a mother? Or was it the sorrow that her life was over, just as it was truly beginning? Could it be that Robert's decision to be cryonically preserved suddenly made sense to her?

Even after he managed to banish the bloody images, questions continued to parade through Robert's mind in an endless loop. How long would the nightmare of Amanda tumbling to the floor play in his head? Was he going to spend the next seventy years reliving every second of Robbie's screwed up life? How would this whole sordid mess affect the Audrey's empire?

He thought back on other controversial stories dragged through the public opinion sewers: mostly sports figures or politicians cheating on their spouses. There were a few rapes and shootings, even a couple murders. But in this instance, neither Robert nor Rachel was remotely involved. He was

reminded of a quote: *You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family.*

In the long run, Robert figured the press would be good for business. Audrey's might even get some sympathy shoppers. Clothing store magnate struck down in the prime of life with cancer. Then his drug-addled son implodes. Hopefully, Jackson Burke would leak a few of the details on Robbie's limited trust agreement. And emphasize how removed Robbie had been from the rest of the family. Of course, the details of Robert's preservation would now be made public.

The media would have a field day with that just like when Ted Williams had been frozen. At least Amanda wouldn't be mocking Robert publicly.

The burden of managing the press fell on Rachel now. And the snowball would roll right over her life as well, dragging her relationship with the Asian woman into the public eye. He accepted alternate lifestyles. Hell, no one could work in the fashion industry and not be sympathetic, even outraged by the discrimination against the gay population. So why was Robert having such a hard time with Rachel?

"Robert?" The sound of Maggie's voice startled him.

Great. He should have ducked into his Dewar the minute he got back. Now he'd have to tell Maggie and Sam all about his dysfunctional family.

An elderly gentleman hobbled behind Maggie, his stooped shoulders taking a good six inches off his height.

"Hello, young fella." The man's voice boomed in the quiet room. He extended a palsied hand to Robert.

"Asa Walker," he shouted, "Grosse Point, patient number sixty-three."

Robert extended his own hand for an awkward non-contact shake. Asa didn't seem to notice.

"Robert Malone," he said. "Patient number seventy-two, I believe." He glanced at Maggie. "Where's Sam?"



"His class starts tomorrow so Asa agreed to come early to relieve him."

"So what brings you back to the Center?" Asa yelled. "Having trouble with mobility? I know I had a heck of a time getting the hang of walking through doors."

"No, Asa," Maggie said quietly. "Robert's had some issues with his family."

When Robert flinched, Maggie gave him a sympathetic smile. "There's a television in the lobby. We've been watching CNN."

"So, you're the fella who's wife got murdered," Asa shouted. "Nasty business. I'm going to talk to Stuart at our next meeting. We need to forbid members from going home."

"Don't be silly!" Maggie snapped at Asa. "And stop yelling. We can hear you just fine."

She attempted to link her arm with Robert's. "Come on. Let's go to the lobby and you can tell me all about it."

Behind him, Asa was still babbling. "Before I'd even reached the glass transition state, my wife had hauled off my Lay-Z-Boy, redecorated the whole house. She joined a bridge club. She's even doing yoga! At her age!" His voice actually dropped a couple decibels. "I didn't know she wanted to do all that stuff? Why didn't she just tell me?"

Maggie wagged a hand at Asa from behind her head to get him to quiet down.

"Asa's got some memory issues," she told Robert. "And he was stone deaf for the last ten years of his life. That's why he talks to loud."

She gestured for Robert to take a seat in one of the easy chairs in the lobby. "He means well, though."

"There's really nothing to tell," Robert said. "If you've been watching the news, you know as much as I do."

He refused to blubber about his family to this old woman. It was too much like being on one of those embarrassing afternoon talk shows.

"Oh, Robert," Maggie sighed. "So like a man. You're all about the facts, and determined not to reveal the tiniest emotion."

"Look, I appreciate your concern," Robert said, "but I think I can handle this by myself."

"That's what they all say," she said. "But you know, even after I retired, friends and family came to me with issues and I did my best to help them work through their problems." She smiled. "It's difficult to stop practicing now."

"I don't need a psychologist," Robert told her flatly.

"No. You need an impartial observer who'll just listen. I'm not here to pass judgment on you or your wife or your son. My job is to help you sort out your feelings."

Robert shook his head. How could he reveal such hatred to this stranger? How his whole family was a bitter disappointment? Once he got started, would he be able to stop?

He remembered his father standing at the front door as the sheriff told him his wife had been killed in an automobile accident. He didn't gasp, or sob, or clutch his chest. His head just wavered, caught in some meaningless gesture between a nod and a shake as the sheriff expressed his deepest sympathies.

And when Robert broke down in tears and ran to his father for comfort, all his father said was, "Stop that, now. Crying won't bring her back."

"Let's go for a walk," Maggie said. "Asa can hold down the fort."

Before Robert could refuse, Maggie passed through the glass front door, then stood on the sidewalk outside, waiting for him.

"Oh, boy," Asa mumbled. "You're in for it now. She won't let up until you tell her everything." He bounced nervously from one foot to the other as he stared through the glass.

"What if I refuse to go?"

Asa threw his head back in a guffaw. "Don't worry young fella," he said. "You might feel like you've been hit by a bus when she's done with you, but you'll be glad you got it all out."

Slouching his shoulders, Robert joined Maggie. She wasn't condescending or smug, as though she knew he had no choice. She merely nodded and started walking.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

He turned his palms up in resignation.

"Were you there at the shooting?"

Robert nodded.

"It's such a helpless feeling," she said. "Seeing something happen, and not being able to prevent it."

Maggie strolled along with her attention directed to the pavement as though she was on the look out for cracks that would have tripped her up. At least she wasn't staring at Robert, waiting for him to say something profound.

"I've been a temp for a couple years now," she continued. "I've heard some heart breaking stories."

"Yeah?" Anger forced Robert to tighten his jaw. "Were any of them about a worthless coward who let his mother get murdered?"

"When were you first aware of Robbie abusing drugs?"

So much for Maggie just listening to him rant.

"Back in middle school," he told her. "He was smoking pot in his bedroom with his friends."

Maggie nodded, still focused on the sidewalk. "Did you or your wife try any type of intervention?"

"Sure! I told Amanda she should take away his privileges, and his allowance. He couldn't buy that stuff if he didn't have money."

"And did she?"

"Heck, no!" Now Robert was really getting streamed. "She never punished him for anything he did. Robbie was her angel, her..."

"And what did *you* do to rein in his bad behavior?"

Robert jerked to a halt. "Oh, sure. Here it comes. Somehow this is all my fault because I didn't discipline him, right? Let me tell you something, every time I put my foot down, Robbie went straight to his mother. She wouldn't back me up."

After hesitating alongside Robert, Maggie began walking again, her head nodding as though she was putting it all together. Robert followed.

"I decided that's just the way things were," Robert said quietly. "My job was to support my family, just like my dad did."

"Did your father take an active role in your upbringing?" she asked. "Punish you when you were bad?"

"I wasn't bad!" Robert said. "I got good grades, I stayed out of trouble."

"And did your father take you fishing, shoot hoops in the driveway—"

"Are you kidding? My father was busy running a business." Robert snorted. "If you want to call it that."

"What business was that?"

"Bobby's Bargain Barn," Robert said with a tisk. "It really was a barn, made of metal, plopped at the edge of a cornfield on the outskirts of town. Women filed in like cows to buy their cotton print dresses and sturdy support shoes. Every piece of foundation was white. God forbid you called it lingerie."

"I guess that's where you got your start in the fashion industry," Maggie said, the hint of a smile crinkling her cheek.

"Yeah." Robert smiled himself as he thought back. "He taught me everything he knew, and I did just the opposite. When he died, I sold that abomination and opened my first Audrey's." He jutted his chin in the air. "I was only twenty-four at the time."

"My, my. You were quite the entrepreneur."

"Yes, I was. I'd been a buyer with Neiman Marcus for a couple years, but they weren't going in the same direction I wanted to go. It was the seventies! Mini skirts, knee-high boots, psychedelic stockings. God, remember plastic dresses? Girls wanted all that. They didn't care if the fad would be over in a month. They wanted to look trendy now."

"And what did your mother think of you selling the business?"

"Oh," Robert slowly shook his head. "She was long gone by then."

"Divorce?"

"No, a 1964 Buick LeSabre. She died when I was fourteen."

"Oh, dear. How tragic."

"Yeah, well—" Robert was suddenly struck with the image of his mother proudly marching down the center aisle of church with a wide-brimmed hat cocked dangerously to one side. He smiled at the memory.

"Tell me about her," Maggie said.

Robert gazed up at the sky, allowing the memory of her smile to linger a moment longer. "She was a swan among ugly ducklings. She'd been raised on Long Island, so when she ended up with my father in this little hick town in Indiana, I guess she tried to escape the boredom by following Hollywood starlets. Especially Audrey Hepburn."

"Thus the name of your stores," Maggie noted.

"Exactly. Unfortunately, Bobby's Bargain Barn didn't stock anything close to the cute capris and straight shifts that were all the rage in Hollywood. So my mother took up sewing."

Robert tried to pinch the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. "Her creations were bad. The buttons didn't line up properly, collars were sewn on crooked."

The smile on his face faltered. "I always told her she looked great, but my dad was pretty blunt. He told her the

clothes were okay for around the house, but she shouldn't wear them to the grocery store. When he saw how he'd hurt her feelings, he tried to soften the blow by telling her that other women would wish they could dress like my mother, but it didn't help. It was one of those no-win situations."

"Like when I asked my husband if the pants I was wearing were too tight," Maggie said. "If he lied, I knew it, and if he told the truth, my feelings were hurt."

"And if you don't say anything," Robert said, "You're still in trouble!"

Maggie chortled. "Of course!"

The emptiness Robert had been experiencing eased up. A weight, like too many blankets piled on his body, dissipated, and he struck a more comfortable gait as he told Maggie about the first commercial his father taped for television.

"He stood stiff as a board, reading the queue cards. The final card instructed him to turn and point a finger at the camera and say: 'We have what you want'." Robert shook his head. "He looked like an idiot."

Robert also confided that his mother had been a Givenchy groupie because he designed most of Audrey Hepburn's outfits.

"She made a big deal out of the fact that she and Hubert were born the same year, and they were both Pisces."

"I can see that you adored your mother," Maggie said. "But you didn't have a lot of respect for your father."

"He was a dolt," Robert said. "He thought that crappy Bargain Barn was really something. And he was there all the time—even Sunday's, doing paperwork. It was like he didn't really love my mother or me. Like he was avoiding us."

"Do you suppose Robbie thought you didn't love him because you spent so much time at Audrey's?"

Robert thought of a clever retort to that. *How was I going to keep his mother in shoes if I hadn't?* But he didn't say it. She probably wouldn't think it was funny.

"I had a lot of good reasons for wanting to make Audrey's successful," he told her. "My wife could have been a frustrated wannabe, just like my mother, but I made her a star. I showed those hicks in my hometown that there was a lot more to fashion than Bobby's Bargain Barn. That would have made my mother happy. And I think my dad would have been proud of how much I accomplished."

"Or envious," Maggie slipped in.

"Yeah, maybe so," Robert said, a defensive edge to his voice. "What's wrong with doing better than he did?"

"You still haven't answered my question. Do you think Robbie felt neglected...ignored by his father?"

"Come on," Robert whined. "Why do you always assume I did something wrong?"

The squeal of tires startled Robert. He wheeled around to see a huge Chevy Tahoe plow into the side of a sporty little car.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Robert and Maggie sprinted to the middle of the intersection where the Tahoe had come to a rest. The smaller car, a Mazda Miata, lay helplessly under the Tahoe's huge tires as though the SUV had pounced on it.

"Oh, my God!" Robert gasped.

The traffic light changed. More tires squealed. Horns honked. Robert watched as other drivers, stunned at first, leaped from their cars and came running. A heavy-set woman dressed in hospital scrubs huffed toward the carnage from the bus shelter on the corner.

The driver of the Tahoe staggered to the front of his car, drew up at the sight of the whole passenger side crushed under his wheels. He dashed around the back of the felled Miata to the driver's window. His head reared back and he let out a moan that seemed almost too high-pitched for a man his size.

Four different people jabbered frantically into their cell phones, all within clear sight of one another. The Tahoe driver attempted to open the driver's door, and when it wouldn't budge, he used both hands. Metal on metal screeched as he tugged.

Another man ran back to his pickup truck and fished around in a toolbox in the truck bed. He sprinted to the wreckage with a crowbar. The heavy-set woman in scrubs wrapped a beefy hand around the Tahoe driver's arm and eased him out of the way.

"She never even stopped," she told the Tahoe driver. "Ran right through the red light."

More on-lookers congregated around the accident, urging on the man with the crowbar, and probably giving silent thanks that the Miata driver hadn't pulled out in front of their car.



Robert watched in amazement as a woman with straight brown hair crawled out through the shattered windshield on the passenger side of the sports car. Everyone else was so preoccupied with getting the driver's door open that they didn't see the woman roll off the hood, and touch down on the asphalt. She wobbled slightly as she straightened, then touched her head and pressed lightly on her chest as though checking for injuries. She didn't seem to have a scratch on her.

"She's dead, isn't she," Robert said to Maggie. He kept an eye on the windshield, waiting for the driver to come crawling out, too.

"Oh, yeah," Maggie said. "Crushed like a bug."

"Geez, Maggie—"

Casting her arm out toward the wreck, she said, "Look at the tires on that hog. They're right over the passenger seat. How much do you think that tank weighs? She never had a chance. Probably died of internal..."

"Okay!" Robert snapped. "I get it."

A subdued cheer went out when the crowbar man got the driver's door open; the car's hinges barked. The heavy-set woman pushed to the front.

"Out of the way, I'm a nurse," she said as she reached into the car. She laid two fingers against the neck of a young woman pinned under the steering wheel.

"I've got a pulse," she called out.

The dead woman tried to push past the huddle at the door, but her arms were useless. Raising her hand in front of her face, she examined her palm. Then she reached out to touch the heavy-set woman. She could not.

Confusion and alarm took turns contorting her face. Then the dead woman drifted back to the passenger side of the car. She shoved her head back through the hole in the windshield, checking out her mangled remains. When she'd seen enough, she just sort of slumped onto the hood of the car.

“This is where it gets interesting,” Maggie whispered. “Does she believe in the hereafter? Will she just – pffft – disappear? Or will she stay?”

“Stay?” Robert remembered how quickly Amanda had disappeared when she was shot. He’d never considered that she had a choice.

Maggie nodded. “Like the man we saw on the bus with his wife. He stuck around to be with her.”

So, had Amanda vanished in hopes of catching up with Martin? Guilt dug into Robert. If he hadn’t made such a big deal about Martin not waiting around, Amanda might have stayed, too. Would she have wanted to see what life was like without her true love?

In the distance, Robert heard the wail of a siren and within seconds, flashing red lights bounced off the windows of the buildings. Rescue workers came running; the young woman driver was wrestled from the wreckage. An oxygen mask was strapped to her face while another EMT strapped one of those neck collars on. All the while, the dead woman watched helplessly.

When the injured woman was loaded into the back of the ambulance, the dead woman climbed in, too.

“See?” Maggie said. “That woman has overridden the system. She’s not leaving, at least not until she sees if her friend pulls through. Or maybe she wants to wait so they can both cross over together.”

“Why don’t you go ask her?”

She ignored his sarcasm. “I don’t think so.”

Maggie floated onto the roof of the ambulance and made herself comfortable. “I’d like to just observe her for a while.”

At least Maggie’s new project would give Robert a reprieve from her scrutiny. He climbed on board.

At the hospital, the dead woman trotted along behind the gurney as the EMTs wheeled the victim through sliding glass doors. But when the trauma doors beyond swung shut in

front of the woman, she pulled up short. Rising on her toes, she glimpsed through a small window, then turned and scanned the hallway in both directions, perhaps hoping someone else would go in. No one did.

She made eye contact with Robert for a split second, but he quickly turned to Maggie like he'd been caught spying.

"She doesn't know she can pass through the doors," he said quietly.

Maggie nodded. "Stuck in living mode."

"Maybe you should tell her," Robert suggested.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the dead woman become more agitated as she paced outside the doors.

Maggie said, "Why don't you talk to her?"

"Me!" Robert didn't want to get caught up in all that emotion. And it wasn't just the crying. Women looked to men for answers. They wanted words of comfort and assurance. They craved strength. Robert was no good at that.

"For goodness sakes, Robert," Maggie said. "You're just going to show her how to get through the doors. How hard can that be?"

Damn that Maggie. She'd goad him now until he did something. The woman didn't take "no" for an answer. He bared his teeth at her and growled, then turned to the dead woman.

"Ma'am?" he called, raising his arm and waving to get her attention.

The woman turned to see who was behind her.

"No," Robert called. "You." He was tempted to say "the dead one" but instead he said. "From the accident."

The dead woman's eyes grew larger and she backed away.

Maggie chuckled. "Great reaction. A ghost afraid of a ghost."

The reality of the situation seemed to sink in, and the dead woman gave them both an embarrassed grimace.

Robert eased a little closer. "You don't have to wait out here. I can show you how to get through the doors and you can see for yourself what's going on in there."

The temporary distraction of seeing him and Maggie faded. The woman's cheeks sagged like she was ready to pucker up and cry.

"I mean," Robert stammered as he waved limp hands at the woman, "if that's what you want to do. It might be... unsettling in there."

Now the dead woman was drifting toward him. If he backed away, he'd never hear the end of it from Maggie. But if he let this woman get closer, she might try to collapse in his arms.

"What's your name?" he asked. Brilliant.

The simple question stopped her; the lines of anguish in her face faded a bit.

"Suzanne," she said.

She had that thin mousy hair that no amount of product could volumize. The dull brown fluff had a smattering of gray, so she obviously wasn't coloring it. She wasn't that well endowed, but by the narrow hips, Robert guessed she was probably a size eight.

"I'm Robert. This is Maggie."

So far, so good. But now that the preliminaries were over, he wasn't sure what to say. *We saw you die in that car accident* didn't seem appropriate.

"Why are you here?" she asked. She seemed genuinely confused, her eyes scanning his face for answers. Then her mouth flew open. "Dear God, you didn't die in that accident, too?"

"What? No!" Robert stammered. "I've been dead for a couple of weeks."

"And someone you know died in the crash?"

Great. How was Robert going to explain that he and Maggie were observing her like a lab rat? He never should have spoken to Suzanne in the first place.

But Maggie shuffled up closer, casual as you please, and said, “We were on the sidewalk when the accident occurred. We followed the ambulance, in case you needed help.”

She made it sound so simple, so easy.

The two women tilted their heads, gave each other Madonna smiles, and instantly bonded.

Skirting around them, Robert walked toward the double doors. “Shall we?”

The twists and furrows distorted Suzanne’s face again, making her look like a bad abstract painting. Her eyes were her only redeeming feature—not round but almond-shaped, just shy of looking Asian. Like Sophia Loren’s eyes.

There were no tears pooling in those dark eyes, but her voice wavered. “I just want to know if she’s going to be all right.”

“Of course you do,” Robert said, motioning for her to come closer. “It’s really very simple once you learn how. The trick is not to think about it.”

He passed through the door, then turned and poked his head back out. “See?”

Fighting her trepidation, Suzanne eased up to the door. “What if I get stuck?”

“It’s not like that,” Robert assured her. “You’ll see.”

With a determined set to her jaw, she charged forward, expecting some resistance. When there was none, she staggered momentarily on the other side to keep her footing.

The noise in the room startled them both. Half a dozen medical personnel were chattering at once. Machines beeped and whooshed. A doctor called out for ten cc’s of something and a nurse bumped into another as she scurried to comply. It looked like one of those old Charlie Chaplin flicks where everything moved slightly faster.

Now that Suzanne had gotten in, the chaos held her at bay.

“Shall I have a look?” Robert asked.

She gave him a grateful nod.

Why had he offered that? If there were any exposed organs or protruding bones, he was going to lose it.

He edged his way toward the examining table, concentrating on the medical staff rather than the injured woman. One of the doctors working on the woman's leg reported that her tibia had completely separated from her kneecap. A different doctor confirmed that her arm was broken. A gaggle of staff huddled at the woman's head. She was unconscious, so there was talk of head trauma, worry that swelling was already taking place. A CAT scan was needed.

Suzanne slipped up next to Robert. She stared at the woman on the table.

"A friend?" Robert asked.

"My daughter."

"I'm sorry." The comment sounded lame the moment Robert said it. "They're doing everything they can." More lame blathering.

Wheels were unlocked, and the gurney was whisked out the doors. Robert and Suzanne jogged to keep up. At least she wasn't crying hysterically. Either the shock hadn't worn off yet, or she was holding her fear at bay so she could follow what was happening.

It didn't take long for the doctors to assess the damage with an MRI. The daughter was back on a gurney and rolling to surgery.

That was when Robert skidded to a halt.

"I think I'll pass," he said. "But you can go on in." He waved an arm toward the surgical suite.

Suzanne stared at the door for a moment, probably envisioning bloody incisions and exposed brain.

"I'm not sure I want to watch the surgery," Suzanne told Maggie. As if Robert had told her she had to.

Maggie gave her that sweet, little-old-lady smile. If she could, she would have patted Suzanne's hand. "I'm sure you

don't. But consider this. If your daughter dies in there, she's going to come out of her body just like you did. She's going to see the surgeons and nurses, but no one she knows."

A moan erupted, and Suzanne shifted fearful eyes to the surgical doors.

"I'm not saying we have to watch," Maggie said, her voice a soothing balm, "but perhaps we should be there, just in case."

Grateful for some direction, Suzanne nodded and followed Maggie into the surgical suite. Robert decided he had nothing better to do and joined them.

They hadn't even gotten settled in a corner of the room before Maggie started in with the twenty questions.

"I gathered from the conversations at the scene that your daughter ran a red light. What happened?"

The woman had no tact. Robert expected a chilly stare from Suzanne in response, but she was eager to spill her guts.

"It was all my fault," she insisted. "I was arguing with my daughter, Angie, and she got distracted."

"What were you arguing about?" Maggie asked.

"Geez, Maggie," Robert interrupted, giving Suzanne a moment to regroup before she told Maggie it was none of her business.

But Suzanne rattled on like she was talking to her best friend.

"Angie is a consultant with an auditing firm. She came to St. Louis about three months ago on an assignment at a stock brokerage firm," Suzanne said. "She met Mark at the company and they've been seeing each other ever since." She shook her head. "I've never seen her so smitten. From the moment I got off the plane, all she could talk about was Mark, Mark, Mark."

Maggie egged her on. "But you have misgivings about this relationship."

"Yes," Suzanne said.

She leaned closer to Maggie, like she didn't want the doctors and nurses to overhear. Or maybe she didn't want Robert listening to her complaints.

"The three of us went to dinner last night," Suzanne told Maggie. "It was awful. He was trying so hard to be charming, it was creepy."

Charming was creepy? Maybe Suzanne got a little bump on the noggin, too.

"How do you mean?" Maggie probed.

"I don't know, just insincere. Like he was saying what he thought I wanted to hear. And flattering Angie way too much. She knows she's not a ravishing beauty. So when Mark says things, like what a knock-out she is, it throws her off. She doesn't know how to react."

She looked to Robert for understanding, but he didn't get it. He thought women always liked being flattered. With a slight shake of her head, she swung back to address Maggie.

"I should have known better than to criticize Mark like that, but Angie was falling so hard, so fast. I just wanted her to slow down a little." Suzanne's voice cracked. "Angie was so busy arguing with me that she never saw the light change."

Twisting her head slightly, Suzanne tried to get a glimpse of what was happening under the surgical lights without seeing anything.

"And now she's fighting for her life because I couldn't keep from meddling."

Ever the professional, Maggie steered Suzanne away from one torturous subject to another. "Did she have boyfriends in high school?"

"Not really," Suzanne said. "She was so shy. And smart. Not a good combination in high school. But she did go to the prom." She raised her head and gazed off at some memory beyond the walls. "She looked like a princess in her gown."

Robert tuned out the rest of the conversation. He drifted through the doors and ambled down the hallway, his



thoughts on his own wife and daughter. If Amanda had been in a similar situation, would she have told the story of Rachel's only prom night?

Rachel wanted to look for a vintage gown at Junkman's Daughter, but Amanda would have none of that. She dragged Rachel to Phipps Plaza and insisted she choose a slinky silk jersey in a bold turquoise with rhinestone straps. When Rachel came downstairs to greet her prom date, Robert had to choke back a laugh.

She had stitched multi-colored scarves around the skirt like a belly dancer, and had cut out a large diamond of jersey fabric in front so her navel showed. Then she'd glued Froot Loops onto the rhinestones along the straps. She even had Froot Loops dangling from the sheer square of chiffon that she'd draped like a mask across her mouth.

Amanda's rage brought tears to her eyes. And Rachel ripped the wound deeper by twirling and posing there in the foyer. Her date, some kid with spiked hair and a string tie that bordered on obscene, praised her handiwork as genius. He even nibbled at one of the pieces of cereal on Rachel's shoulder strap.

When it became obvious that Amanda had no intention of taking pictures, Robert wrenched the camera from her clutched fingers and snapped several shots. He wondered now if the film had ever been developed.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time Robert got back, Angie was out of surgery. He found Maggie and Suzanne hovering over the girl's body in one of those glass booths of the ICU.

The two women glanced up when he came into the room, then turned back to Suzanne's daughter.

Her head was wrapped in bandages like a turban; her face was swollen. Under her eyes, dark blue bruises pooled and bled over the bridge of her nose. There were lots of scratches, probably from shattering glass. A tube inserted in her mouth was taped securely, and a machine breathing for her whooshed steadily. Her left arm and right leg were in casts.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nah," Maggie said. "We won't get any official report until someone from the family meets with the doctor. And then I'm sure all he's going to tell them is that the next twenty-four hours are critical. It's their standard response to all questions because they don't know what to expect either."

"So your husband is on the way?" he asked Suzanne.

She shook her head. "My husband died four years ago. My parents are coming from Wisconsin."

With a tip of her head, Maggie signaled for Robert to meet her in the hallway.

"I'm going back to the center and tell Asa where we are and what's going on," she said.

"What?"

She was going to leave him with Suzanne? What if the daughter died? He'd be stuck consoling the grieving mother. On the other hand, if he went with Maggie to the center, he might get stuck holding down the fort with Foghorn Leghorn.

"Well hurry back," he said.

Once Maggie disappeared, Robert stalled out in the hallway, watching Suzanne through the glass. If he went

back into the room, he was sure she'd want to talk. What was he supposed to say? Of course, Maggie never said much. She just listened, and whenever Suzanne ran out of steam, the old bat just popped out another question. Now all he needed was a question.

Slowly, he eased through the glass, like some spy trying to sneak past a sentry. It didn't work. The moment he eased into a corner, Suzanne looked up.

"I don't get it," she said. "Do you two just hang out at the hospital to console dead people like me?"

"Oh, no," Robert said. "It's like Maggie said. We were standing there when the accident happened. Although, I must admit, Maggie's a bit of a busybody. She likes to get right into other people's business."

"Is she your mother?"

"Dear God, no." Robert shuddered at the thought. "The truth is, we're both in limbo...waiting to come back."

Suzanne wrinkled her nose in confusion, and Robert proceeded to tell her about cryonics. He had barely scratched the surface of perfusion when she interrupted.

"So, will Maggie come back the same as she is now?"

Robert snorted a little chuckle. "We don't really know, but I'm sure if they figure out a way to bring us back, they'll be able to fix the wrinkles and sagging jowls."

"I don't know," she said. "It seems like a real gamble to me."

"A gamble!" Robert blurted. "I was dead. Done. If I never get thawed out, how will that be different from being reduced to ashes, or getting buried in a box? Other than investing some of the money I *won't* be spending any time soon, what did I have to lose?"

Odd that he was defending his decision to Suzanne when he'd been doubting his actions with Maggie just days ago.

"I guess you're right." Suzanne looked down at her daughter. "If I'd known about cryonics, I might have gotten on the waiting list like you and Maggie."

"Believe me, it was just luck that I found out about it. But mark my words. Something big will happen in the next few years and a lot more people will be signing up for cryonics."

"I wonder why I'm still here? Doesn't it seem like I should have gone to heaven or someplace? Or are there billions of ghosts wandering around out there?"

"No, Maggie says you're the exception. She thinks you're hanging around to make sure your daughter's okay."

"And then I'll disappear?"

"I honestly don't know," Robert said, pondering his next move. "Maybe you got some kind of 24-hour reprieve. You know, like if Angie had died moments after you, then you two could cross-over together?"

Instead of wincing at his suggestion, her face smoothed into serene acceptance.

"That's interesting," she said. "So the clock may be ticking."

Robert shrugged.

"Too bad." Suzanne scanned her eyes across the room and out into the hall. "I'd like to hang around. See what happens with Angie. See my grandchildren."

"No you don't," he said, but then regretted opening up that conversation. He thought of a quick diversion to take Suzanne's attention away from family.

"I was CEO of the Audrey's Corporation but now I'm a nobody who's stuck riding buses and staring at bad art."

He suddenly had her full attention.

"You mean like Audrey's clothing stores?"

"That's the one."

"Oh, my goodness," she crooned. "I love to shop there. So does Angie."

Leaning back, she got a wistful look. "Your wife is so lucky. I suppose she can walk into one of your stores anytime she likes and take her pick."

"To tell you the truth, she never wore anything from Audrey's unless she was modeling it."

“Modeling it?” Suzanne did a double take. “What does that mean?”

“I was married to the original Audrey’s Girl, Amanda Litrell.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Oh, my.” A dreamy expression settled on her face. “I always thought she was beautiful. All curvy and soft. Not like those bony models with their sucked-in cheeks.”

“Yeah, well, after she had two kids she got a lot more curvy and soft.”

Suzanne patted her stomach. “A lot of women put on a few pounds after they have children.”

“A few pounds?! Amanda ballooned out like the Pillsbury doughboy.”

The smile on Suzanne’s face sank into a scowl. Then her jaw dropped, and she gasped.

“Wait a minute! She was just killed,” she said. “I saw it on the news.”

Robert nodded. “Yeah, I was there.”

“But...how can you talk about her like that,” Suzanne sputtered. “Why aren’t you still with her? Didn’t she stay like I did?”

Great. Now he’d have to explain the argument he had with Amanda just moments after she was shot to death. And probably the details of his wife and attorney in bed together. This was why men didn’t get into meaningful conversations. They never ended until the guy somehow got blamed for everything.

“No,” he said, vaguely waving his hand, “she didn’t stay.”

An awkward silence wedged itself between various mechanical beeps and whooshes in the room. Suzanne sat quietly, studying her fingernails. Then she wandered over to have a closer look at the machines keeping her daughter alive.

There was no clock in the room, but when a different nurse came in later, Robert figured it was a shift change. The

nurse checked all the monitors and took Angie's pulse. When she lifted an eyelid and shine a light in her eye, Angie flinched.

Her eyes fluttered a few times before staying open. Suzanne rushed to her side, but of course, it was useless.

"Angie," the nurse said in a commanding voice, "you've been in a car accident. You're in the hospital. Do you understand?"

Angie gave a weak nod. Her head thrashed a bit and her eyes widened.

"You have a breathing tube in your mouth," the nurse told her. "But now that you're awake, I'll get the doctor. Maybe we can take that out. Okay?"

She nodded again, stronger this time.

Suzanne slumped onto Angie's chest with a sob.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "My baby. My sweet girl."

She even attempted to brush Angie's hair back.

"Very good," the nurse told Angie. "You just hang tight. Someone will be back shortly."

Sure enough, a different nurse rolled in a cart with a tray of medical knick-knacks, and a doctor swooshed in a while later.

He told Angie to squeeze his fingers, asked her a few questions, then told her he was going to take the tube out of her throat.

"This will be a bit unpleasant," the doctor said. "But if you blow real hard when I tell you to, we'll get it over with quickly, okay?"

Angie blew as instructed and the doctor pulled this long tube out. There was lots of gagging and choking, but eventually Angie settled back on her pillows with a sigh.

"Better?" the doctor asked as he held her wrist, his fingers on her pulse.

"Yes," she croaked.

"The nurse will give you some ice chips. That will quench your thirst and ease that sore throat. Then I'm afraid you're

in for some more pain. The police want to ask you some questions about the accident.”

The officer was just about to take a seat when Angie asked, “My mom. How’s my mom?”

Remaining on his feet, the officer shook his head. “I’m afraid your mother didn’t make it. She could not be resuscitated at the scene of the accident.”

Angie let out a wail that nearly brought Robert to his knees. There she lay, flat on her back, bruised and broken, and totally alone.

“Oh, baby,” Suzanne cried along with her. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Where the hell was Maggie? Robert stepped out into the hallway, but she was nowhere in sight. He wondered if he could pop back to the center during all this confusion and tell Maggie to get her butt back here. Robert would be more than happy to keep Asa company now.

The policeman offered his condolences, his feet shuffling on the floor, his fingers sliding nervously along the band of his hat. Finally a nurse came in and sat on the edge of the bed, right on Suzanne, and took Angie’s hand.

“Your grandparents are on their way,” she told Angie. “We just got a call from the airport.” She moved a strand of blood-caked hair off Angie’s forehead and tucked it to the side as she softly reassured the girl that everything would be all right.

Suzanne moved away from her awkward position between Angie and the nurse. She tried to make eye contact with Robert, but he wasn’t going there. She expected some sort of comfort, but he had no idea what to do. He cursed himself again for not going back to the center with Maggie.

With no one to talk to, Suzanne drifted over to the far side of the bed and perched next to Angie, stroking her hair as the policeman went through his painful questions.

Robert wondered if Angie would be charged with vehicular homicide. Hopefully, the cop had the decency to wait until she was out of the hospital to hit her with that bad news.

At some point, Robert felt a presence and turned to see a man in the doorway. He was handsome in his three-piece suit, his hair styled by a professional. Robert guessed the man was in his early thirties. He held a bouquet of red roses in both hands, like an offering.

"Wow," Robert muttered. "I wonder who he's looking for."

Suzanne turned to look and groaned. "That's Mark, the man Angie's been dating."

"Are you serious? He's the creep?"

She folded her arms in contempt. "Look at that suit."

"I know," Robert said. "I'm guessing it's custom-fitted. And that's a fabulous tie."

"No," Suzanne whined. "I mean it's so pretentious."

"I think he has impeccable taste."

Mark paled a bit at the sight of Angie's injuries. If he turned and ran, Robert wouldn't blame him. But he didn't.

"Oh, honey," he gasped.

Jolted out of her misery, Angie raised a tentative hand to smooth her hair, like that might help. But Mark obviously didn't care. With a rush, he charged into the room, tossing the flowers carelessly on the chair. The nurse barely had time to stand before Mark brushed past her and sat in the same small indentation on the edge of the bed.

The police officer snapped his notebook closed. Maybe he thought Mark was Angie's attorney.

"Oh, brother," Suzanne mumbled. "He's putting on quite a show."

"Angie, baby," Mark moaned. Taking her hand, he kissed her fingers, then brushed them against his cheek. "I just found out."

Robert tried to look past the swollen, bruised face to imagine what Mark saw in her. The man oozed confidence



and success, but Angie had the same mousy hair and plain features as her mother. What was the attraction?

"I've been calling your cell for hours," Mark told Angie, "but I figured you had it turned off."

Angie's fat bottom lip trembled.

"My mother—"

"I know," Mark said. "I heard."

A tear trickled out of Angie's puffy eye, and Mark quickly dabbed it with a tissue from the bedside stand.

Tears gushed. She bawled like an orphaned calf, her mouth a gaping chasm. Her anguish didn't faze Mark in the least.

Lifting tubes, he managed to wrangle closer to Angie. He cradled her gently in his arms and let her tears soak into his fabulous suit.

Robert turned to Suzanne. "You think this is all an act?"

"No," she whined. "I don't know. But this isn't the way he was last night at dinner."

She went through the motion of wringing her hands, but when she didn't get any tactile satisfaction, she splayed her fingers in front of her face and stared at the useless appendages. Then she dropped her arms to her sides.

"He was so patronizing, so condescending to both Angie and me."

"I don't know," he said. "He seems genuinely concerned to me."

Suzanne actually stamped her foot. She might have stormed out of the room, but at that moment an elderly couple tottered through the door. The grandparents.

They were about what Robert expected. Suzanne's mother wore her gray hair twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. She was petite, like Suzanne, and still shapely for a woman her age. But the drab beige slacks and white blouse did nothing to add color to her pallor.

Suzanne's father was a good six feet tall, with a full head of gray hair, and a stature that said he'd been successful for

a very long time. Did Suzanne interpret his confidence as patronizing, too?

The room was suddenly overflowing with people. The nurse made a quick exit, and after introductions and the passing of business cards, the policeman left as well.

There were more tears of course. Mark politely stepped aside to let the family grieve. Angie ranted that her mother's death was all her fault, and the grandparents dutifully denied her culpability.

Robert had decided he was ditching the whole scene when, at last, Maggie showed up.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked.

"There was a bit of trouble at the center," she said, glancing beyond Robert's shoulder to take in all the new faces.

"Well, I'm out of here," he insisted.

Maggie patted the air with her hand. "Sure, sure. Let me just say goodbye to Suzanne."

The drama had eased up a bit. Mark offered to find a second chair and dashed out the door. Maggie took a moment to ogle the man before waving Suzanne over.

She appeared more stricken with grief than before, if that was possible.

"It looks like Angie's got plenty of support now," Maggie told Suzanne. "I've got a bit of an emergency I need to take care of. Would you like to come along?"

"No, no," Suzanne said. "I want to stay here."

"I understand," Maggie nodded. "We'll be back in a couple days to check in on you, okay?"

Again with the zombie nod. What was wrong with Suzanne all of a sudden?

"Funny, isn't it?" she said to Robert. "I'm the only one who doesn't like Mark. And now I don't even know why. If I hadn't jumped to conclusions, if I hadn't forced my opinion on Angie, we never would have been arguing in her car."

She choked out a bitter laugh.

“If I’d given him half a chance, I’d still be alive.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Robert practically sprinted to the window in the waiting room at the end of the corridor. He dove to the sidewalk below and then waited for Maggie to catch up.

"What a nightmare," he said, shivering his torso like he was shaking off a clammy hand.

"Don't you feel any satisfaction in helping someone through a rough time?"

"No," he said. "Usually, when I stick my nose in someone else's business, the only thing I end up with is a bruised nose."

"Well then, you better not come with me," Maggie said, "because I'm heading to South Carolina to check in with somebody."

"You mean butt in?"

"A man named Stan Borkner joined the Cryonics Center seven years ago. He was advised at the time to set up a Living Will and establish a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. But we don't think he did."

"Oh, great."

Not only had Jackson Burke drawn up those documents for Robert, he'd gotten Amanda, Rachel and Robbie all to sign Relative's Affidavits, accepting his decision to be cryopreserved and agreeing not to interfere.

"So what's the emergency with Stan Borger?" Robert asked.

"Stan *Borkner* died six months ago. The Cryonics Center was never notified to come and get the body."

"Oh, boy."

"Yeah. The center just found out about his death when his brother sent a request for a refund."

"A refund!"

"He reasoned that since he was next of kin, and Stan never used the center's services, the brother was due a

refund.”

“Which was his plan all along, no doubt,” Robert said.

“We were all warned about greedy family and relatives. I don’t know why Stan didn’t take proper precautions.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with you.”

“The Cryonics Center will handle the legal repercussions of this incident. But as the designated representative of the newly-departed, it’s my job to handle glitches with the dead. I need to go see if Stan Borkner is still in South Carolina and needs our support.”

“That’s a pretty high-falutin’ way of saying you’re going to go poke around.”

“Wouldn’t you want someone to listen to your frustrations?” she asked. “Don’t you think we helped you when you first got to the center?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Robert agreed.

He imagined Stan Borkner might be pretty steamed. Was he hanging around his brother’s house banging doors and creaking floorboards? Another image popped into his head of Asa making the trip to South Carolina instead of Maggie. All that blustering and yelling would probably put poor Stan over the edge.

Once they got settled on a flight, Maggie asked Robert if anyone in his family objected to his being preserved.

“You mean, like everyone I told?”

Maggie laughed. “I guess Joe and I were lucky. Both our sons agreed with our decision.”

“My wife Amanda was opposed to it the most, but then she stood to lose the most. Rachel was supportive, but after I told her, she always looked at me a little different. Robbie really didn’t care. But I suspect that was mostly because he was so out of it on drugs. He must have figured that his mother would get all the money and he’d be sitting pretty.

“He did add a nice note to the Relative’s Affidavit he signed. He wrote, ‘Who the fuck cares what you do?’”

"I guess the closest we came to someone objecting, was my sister, Maeve. But her concern is that we're jeopardizing our chances of reincarnating as a higher being."

"How long were you and Joe married?" Robert asked.

"Sixty-seven years."

"Are you going to try and hook up again...in the future?"

The idea of spending another whole lifetime with the same woman was revolting to Robert.

"Sure. Why not? We've been very happy together. Why mess up a good thing?"

"So, you're one of those soulmate people who thinks you were meant for each other."

"Not at all. But we've learned how to live harmoniously. We know each others' favorite things, our hot buttons, foods, entertainment, sexual preferences."

Robert sniggered.

"You may not believe this," Maggie said, "but I have a normal, healthy appetite. And I'm looking forward to being young again, with lots of estrogen and flexibility."

"Geez, Maggie," Robert hissed, and glanced nervously around the first-class cabin as if someone might have overheard.

"You told Sam that your wife was...how did you put it?...lacking the va-va-voom? And what did you do during your twenty-eight years of marriage to fix that?"

Damn it! Every time he talked to Maggie, she turned whatever he said into something he'd done wrong.

"What is a man supposed to do when his wife makes it abundantly clear she does not want to be touched?"

"See a counselor, read books that can be discussed, ask her what she wants?"

"She wanted to be left alone!"

Robert turned to glare out the airplane's window at the darkness below. End of discussion. But as he gazed at small towns that twinkled below, he couldn't help wondering what magic Martin had worked to get Amanda to warm up.

Maggie interrupted Robert's thoughts by leaning across him to peer out the window.

"Could be tricky getting a ride to Marshallton this late at night. Our best bet will be a truck stop. Those guys drive all night."

"We're going to catch a ride with a trucker," Robert muttered.

"Oh, just wait, Robert. Those guys are the most fun."

Maggie literally wriggled with excitement.

"You should see the compartments in their cabs. They don't just have beds, they've got refrigerators and TVs. All the comforts of home."

"I'll bet."

The sun was just coming up when they climbed out of the rig at a truck stop on the outskirts of town.

Maggie pretended to stretch, like it had been a long haul. Robert was just grateful he couldn't smell. The truck driver they'd been riding with looked like he'd worn the same flannel shirt for the past two years. The 'comforts of home' in the back of his cab included tipped over beer cans, half-eaten burgers and sticky porn magazines.

"Come on," Maggie said as she headed for the restaurant at the truck stop. "Sometimes they have local maps on the wall for the drivers. Let's see where Jasmine Lane is."

The street was the main drag of a trailer park. Robert squinted up at the street sign. It read Jessamine Lane.

"Do you suppose they know they spelled it wrong?"

Maggie found the address and poked her head through the trailer door.

"Stan?" she called.

But when Robert passed into the trailer, he found a retired couple sitting at a tiny table sipping coffee.

"It appears brother dearest has also sold Stan's palatial estate," he said.

Maggie nodded. "I figured as much, but you never know."

Back outside, she hesitated as she watched an older model sedan drive away.

"Oh, poo, I'll bet that's Stan's brother Jim. He supposedly lived right next door to Stan. What day is this?"

Counting back, Robert decided it was Sunday.

"Bet they're going to church," Maggie said. "Let's go see."

The next thing he knew, Maggie was standing on top of the car as it headed down the road.

As he hurried to catch up, Robert wondered if Maggie's husband ever got tired of her bossiness. Maybe she thought they were going to hook up in the afterlife, but old Joe had other plans. After all, he would be revived first. He might find someone even more compatible than sweet old Maggie.

When the car pulled into the parking lot of a crappy little cinderblock church a couple miles later, he amended his pondering to include her always being right.

The couple climbing out of the car must have been in their eighties. The man wore suspenders that bowed out to make room for his enormous belly. He wore a ball cap that read: Husqvarna. A farmer who must have worked his whole life to afford his luxurious retirement home. The wife wore a lime-green polyester shift with several snags in the knit, and a dingy cream-colored cardigan with front plackets that drooped from constant tugging to conceal her own stomach. She used a cane to support her weight, but still leaned on her husband's arm with her free hand.

A cheap organ quietly played as the couple hobbled to the first available pew and took their seats.

Up at the altar, a handful of country folk in choir robes shuffled to a row of chairs, and a minister slipped silently to the pulpit. When the organist banged out the last few chords of the song, the minister leaned into the microphone and said: "This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice."

"Rejoice!?" a man yelled. "For what? A bunch of goddamn liars and cheats?"



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

From the back of the church, Robert scanned the crowd, looking for an embarrassed wife or mother attempting to hush the blasphemer, but no one reacted to the man's outburst.

Robert wasn't even sure where he was, but then a man rose up from behind the preacher like some alien predator in a movie. His face was contorted in a snarl, his teeth bared. When he was directly over the preacher's head, he called out, "Mornin', Reverend Daniels."

"Oh, boy," Maggie muttered. "Here we go."

The man danced a little two-step shuffle on the clergyman's head without ruffling the first hair.

Oblivious, the preacher called the congregation to prayer. He started with the usual praise to God's glory.

"Who are you to tell us what God wants, you two-bit fake," the man yelled. "You're not even a real preacher!"

Drawing his knees up high, the angry man tried to stomp on the preacher's head.

"Forgive us our sins," the preacher continued.

"Our sins!? Yeah, let's talk about sins. Let's talk about my good-for-nothin' brother and his greedy wife, taking my money, selling my home."

The man flew down the aisle to where the man with the bulging belly sat with his wife. He punched wildly at his brother's flaccid jowls, but nothing happened.

"Looks like we found Stan," Maggie whispered.

He carried on with his one-two punches even after the congregation stood to sing a song.

Robert whispered back, "He can't even make his cheek twitch."

"He's not concentrating," Maggie said. "I think he's too angry to focus. Oh, good God! He just tried to spit on his brother."

Frustrated with the lack of results, Stan swirled up to the ceiling and hovered.

"Where's that idiot doctor?"

Like Casper the friendly ghost, Stan flew up and down the aisles, checking faces.

"Here you are, you sniveling coward."

Stan attempted to stomp the hymnal out of a man's hands, but it was another failure.

Clicking her tongue, Maggie moved past other parishioners lined up in the back for a quick getaway, and started up the aisle toward Stan.

By the time she got to the aisle where Stan was using the doctor's hymnal as a trampoline, the song ended.

"Hello, Stan," she said.

His head jerked in her direction. His bottom jaw hung slack.

"You look like you're very angry at these people," she said. She didn't cross her arms, or perch her hands on her hips. She simply made an observation. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Maggie Nelson. I'm a member of the Cryonics Center in St. Louis."

"How can you see me?"

"Well, I'm a dead member. My body was cryopreserved a couple years ago."

That got ole' Stan fired up again.

"Do you know what my goddamn brother and his wife did?" He shot an accusing finger in the brother's direction.

"They had me cremated!"

"We heard," Maggie said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Sorry! What good is that going to do me?"

Her shoulders inched up as she tilted her head. "About as much good as trying to kick the preacher, or belt your brother."

For a moment, Stan considered giving up, but then he screamed out a war-cry and flew at his brother full-steam. Not only did he pass through his brother, but he went through the next two pews behind the man. Still not the first flinch.

That final effort seemed to take the wind out of his sails. As he shuffled back toward Maggie, he nibbled at the corner of his lip like he was trying to keep it from trembling.

"Why didn't Abner just do what I asked?" Stan said.

Maggie sighed. "Money is a powerful thing. Some people can't resist its force."

The minister read a scripture from the Bible. After snarling in his direction, Stan said, "Let's get out of here."

Out on the front steps, Stan did a double-take when he saw Robert.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Robert Malone."

"Great," Stan moaned. "And I suppose you're a member, too."

Robert pinched his lips in sympathy.

"Well, you both are goddamn lucky your family did what you asked them to do."

Maggie eased down onto the step.

"I don't understand what when wrong," she said. "Didn't the center talk to you about a Living Will?"

"I had that!" Stan screeched. "I had the Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. I had the Relative's Affidavits."

His fingers scratched at his scalp.

"I even made that stupid video so if my sister-in-law tried to prove I wasn't of sound mind, Abner could play that back."

"So why didn't your attorney stop them?" Maggie asked.

"He was in Michigan. That's where I'm from originally. By the time he heard about my death, I'd been cremated."

"Oh, my!"

"Yeah. The second the doctor pronounced me dead, my brother had a meat wagon ready to haul me to the incinerator."

"Didn't your doctor know about your plan?"

For the first time, Stan appeared a bit chagrined.

"I told him," he said, but then his voice dropped. "But I never gave him a copy of the will."

"But when you died," Robert asked, "didn't he at least mention the will to your brother, Abner?"

"He made a half-assed attempt. But my sister-in-law just said 'what will?' And of course, he was way outnumbered. The preacher was there, insisting my brother was doing the right thing. Talking about how it was an abomination to want to come back."

Maggie raised a finger. "Hang on, now. What about your wife? Your kids?"

Stan turned his head to gaze out at the small cemetery next to the church.

"Elizabeth died four years ago. We moved down here where it was warmer 'cause of her health." Again, he clamped the corner of his lip to keep it from trembling. "We never could have kids."

"Was your wife a member of the center?" Maggie asked.

"Nah." He turned back toward her. "The day I saw an article in that scientific magazine, I decided to join. We were at the doctor's office—again. I showed her the story, asked her to join with me. Said we could come back and try to have a family in the future, when she was healthy. But she wasn't interested. Didn't think God would approve."

"So you had no one championing your cause?" Maggie said. "Does your brother have children?"

"Oh, sure. Three greedy little bastards." Stan raised his fists in the air like he wanted to punch something, anything. "Do you have any idea how much my wife and I spent on Christmas presents, birthday presents for those kids? She even tucked twenty-dollar bills in greeting cards for every

holiday that came along. But did any of them speak up? Hell, no! They all hung around my brothers' house, wringing their hands until they'd gotten word that my ashes were ready to be picked up."

His voice cracked.

"They bought the cheapest urn the guy had."

"I'm so, so sorry," Maggie said.

"Do you have kids?" Stan asked her.

"Two sons."

"I know men don't usually feel this way," he said, "but my whole life, I wanted to have children. I didn't care if it was sons or daughters. I just wanted to have someone I could show how to catch a ball or tie a shoe. I'd have sat with them when they did their homework. Or gone to watch them play baseball or sing in a choir."

Maggie nodded like she understood completely. Robert hoped neither of them realized how little he identified with Stan. He'd certainly never had that burning desire to deal with all the crying and misbehavior that came with kids. If Stan only knew how few rewards parents got for all the effort, he wouldn't be so glum.

"And you thought when they revived you in the future," Maggie said, "they'd have a way to fix your problem."

"Exactly!"

Her head wobbled as she looked at Stan. She turned and studied the church for a moment, her head still gyrating like it was loose. Then, after taking a quick glance at the cemetery, she seemed to come to some kind of conclusion.

"So, when church is over, what do you do? Go back to their house and try to knock over coffee cups, get the windows to rattle at night?"

Stan was pretty shocked that she had him pegged so well. The corners of his mouth turned down.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Sometimes I go to the elementary school, see if Abner's grandkids miss me."

He made an embarrassing snort. "I think I scared their dog once. He piddled on the floor and got a beating. I felt bad about that."

"And are you satisfied with all this?" Maggie gestured with her palms turned up.

Stan shook his head. "No."

"I can't guarantee there's someplace else out there where you can go," she told Stan. "Heaven or Nirvana or whatever."

She looked at the church again, then at all the cars in the gravel parking lot. Robert got the feeling she was dragging things out, giving Stan time to think it through.

"It just seems like you're not too happy in this particular astral plane." She grinned, but Stan didn't find the new age comment funny. Or he didn't get it.

"But if there is something else out there," she said. "I'd have to think there are children in that world. Children who died young, with no parents now. No brothers or sisters."

All the strife in Stan's face smoothed away, like some stabbing pain had suddenly eased. His jaw slacked.

"They could be lonely. Or scared," he said.

"Or they just might need someone to ask a question. Or tell a silly joke."

Then Stan did the same thing she did: he stared at the church and all the cars in the parking lot and out at the cemetery.

He gave Maggie a wane smile and thanked her before turning to walk away. He disappeared before he even got to the rickety fence surrounding the headstones.

"Holy smokes!" Robert said. "Did you know that would happen?"

She seemed just as startled. "I thought we'd see some bright light or something."

"Angels plucking harps."

She chuckled. "Or at least he'd have to click his heels three times."

Robert nodded, still staring at the place where Stan had vanished. "So, he made a decision to crossover, and bingo, he's gone."

"Looks that way."

"Do you really think there are children out there, all alone?"

"I don't know why not," Maggie said. "They die. What makes them different from us?"

He hoped she was right, for Stan's sake. Maggie had just sent the man off to the abyss.

"So now what?" Robert asked.

"I've got to get back to the center. Asa's been on his own for two days now."

Robert groaned. "I guess that means three more hours in a truck cab listening to country music."

"Actually, I thought I'd just blink myself back."

A caustic laugh erupted as Robert considered his dilemma. "And hang out with Asa. How many days until the meeting in New York?"

"Eight."

"Oh, no." Robert gave his head a hard shake. "I can't handle eight more days of Asa. Maybe I'll go on ahead to New York and meet you there."

"What an excellent idea!" Maggie even fake clapped her hands. "Why don't you stop back at the hospital first and see if Suzanne's gotten tired of her family yet."

"I'd rather not. She's probably still chastising herself for being wrong about her daughter's boyfriend."

"So? Maybe you can cheer her up."

"That's not likely," he said. "I'm not good at conversations like that."

"You don't have any problems talking to me."

Robert chortled and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, what?" Maggie said. "It's easy to talk to an old bag?"

"You said it, not me."

She rose up on her toes to get closer to his face. "I got news for you. You've got seventy-five years of waiting around to come back. And you're not going to be sweeping any ladies off their feet with your money or your good looks. You better get good at conversation."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Angie was no longer in the ICU, but it didn't take Robert long to find the room where she'd been moved. There were flowers in every available space on the window ledge and bedside table. Mark sat perched on the edge of her bed, discussing a newspaper article about a bank merger with Angie's grandfather. It looked like Angie had dozed off, and the grandmother, reclined back in one of the two chairs in the room, wasn't far behind.

At first, Robert thought Suzanne was gone, but then he spotted her slumped in the corner near the bathroom door. He took a couple steps closer.

"Hey," he said softly, like he might wake Angie. "How you doing?"

Suzanne looked up, that sorrowful expression distorting her face again.

"I'm stuck."

His right eyebrow cocked up. He reached out a hand, knowing he couldn't help her to her feet, but thought it might get her moving in the right direction.

"No. I mean I'm stuck here." She rose to her feet. "I got so sick of my parents fawning all over Mark, and Mark fawning over Angie, that I decided to just give it up. You know, do that crossover thing. But it didn't work."

"Really. I just saw a guy do it yesterday. I'm not sure what he did, but once he decided to leave, it happened pretty fast. He just pffft, disappeared."

"Well, I've been trying, but so far, no pffft."

"Let me see."

Now she cocked her eyebrow. But then she squared her shoulders, planted her feet apart, and even closed her eyes. Nothing. She sort of peeked one eye back open.

"See?"

"Are you sure you're trying?"

Her eyes bugged out, her nostrils flared. "Yes, I'm sure. I even went to my funeral yesterday. I thought maybe it would happen there."

"Like some angels might be waiting for you?"

She giggled, and the musical way her voice sort of rose up and back down made Robert smile.

"No. But I thought maybe my husband Phil would be waiting for me." She twisted her mouth in a melancholy frown.

"When they were freezing my body, I thought I was going to stay right in there and sleep until they brought me back. I even tried to get in, but I couldn't."

"So, what do you think is wrong?" she asked.

"Beats me. Maybe there's still something you have to do for Angie."

Suzanne shook her head.

"There's no way she's walking away from Mark. And I can't stand to be around him for another minute."

As if to prove her point, Mark grasped Angie's limp hand between both of his and rubbed until her eyes fluttered open. Then he smiled and leaned to kiss her forehead.

"See?" Suzanne said. "She was sound asleep. But he can't stand blathering without an audience, so he woke her up!"

She stomped out of the room.

Following her, Robert asked, "Why didn't you go somewhere else?"

"Maggie said she'd be back, and I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye."

"Ah, well she's at the Cryonics Center. You can go over there and hang out with her. At least for the next eight days."

He explained about the temps meeting in New York. And because he didn't want to discourage her, he left out the part about Asa being at the center, too.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm heading up to New York."

“Now?”

Her eyes lit up like a game show contestant who’d just picked the right door. Frantically, Robert searched for the most boring reason he could think of for going to the city.

“Yeah, well, I used to do some business in New York. I thought I’d drop in on some clients.”

She wasn’t buying it.

“I’ve never been to New York,” she said, her eyes all dreamy and hopeful.

Dang that Maggie! He never should have listened to her about checking up on Suzanne. How was he going to get out of inviting her to come along? And her motor was already running with the prospect.

“Have you been to the Statue of Liberty?” she asked.

“No.”

“The Empire State Building?”

He shook his head.

“The World Trade Memorial?”

Dear God, how could he admit he hadn’t taken the time to check that out?

“Look, I was usually there on business,” he said. “I’ve been to Central Park and Times Square. And that’s because we did some advertising shoots there.”

“So really,” she said, “you’ve never been to New York either. Just office buildings.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Come on, Robert. Let’s go explore New York.”

He was tempted to suggest she wait until she was invited, but realized how stuffy that sounded. After all, she was free to go wherever she wanted. He’d figure out some way to ditch her once they got there.

\* \* \*

“I haven’t traveled much,” Suzanne confided as she settled in next to Robert in first class. “Motion sickness. My

whole life. When I flew here to visit Angie, I had to take two Dramamine tablets just to get through the take-off."

"Well, you've got nothing to worry about now," Robert said. "Your stomach won't do flip-flops anymore."

The flight attendant began her demonstration on the proper use of oxygen masks.

Suzanne giggled. "You know, I'm one of those who followed along. I even pulled out the card so I could look at the illustrations."

Robert was already regretting his decision to let Suzanne tag along. This whole trip to New York was going to be one country-bumpkin episode after another. At least no one else would see Suzanne craning her neck to check out the skyscrapers, or fawning over the horse-drawn carriages at Central Park.

As the plane backed out of the gate, he wandered into the aisle to see who might be reading something interesting. Suzanne followed him.

He huffed a sigh as he looked over his shoulder at her. "This is probably a three-hour flight. You might want to find someone with headphones so you can listen to music, or watch whatever's on the viewing screen."

Taking his suggestion, she scanned all the passengers in first class, but most of them were businessmen scrambling to finish up something on their laptop before they were told to stow them away for take-off.

She even glanced forward to the flight attendants, bustling about in the tiny galley. Was she thinking of helping serve refreshments?

Her eyes were wide when she looked up at him. "Have you ever been in the cockpit?"

"No," he said. "The door is always locked."

"Well, yeah," she said. "But so what?"

He stared down the long aisle to the back of the plane, at all the potential passengers reading magazines and

newspapers. Then he snuck a look over his shoulder at Suzanne.

"Come on!" she said, "Let's go watch the take-off."

Unlike Maggie, she actually waited for him to approve the idea before she trotted to the small cabin door and passed through.

Inside the small cockpit, Robert was dumbstruck by all the instruments: dials, switches, buttons, blinking lights, levers.

"What could all this possibly be for?" he asked.

"Who knows," Suzanne said as she scanned gauges. "I think this one shows how much waste is building up in the number four bathroom."

She scooted up right next to the pilot as the plane taxied slowly along the tarmac. And when the plane turned for take-off, she laid her hand right on top of his on the throttle.

"Hey," Robert said. "Don't be goofing around."

He got an exaggerated eye roll. Then Suzanne hunched down so her head was level with the pilot. As the plane roared down the runway, she squealed. And when the wheels came off the ground, she actually hooted like some fanatic football fan.

The plane steadily climbed, and Robert had to admit that the view from the front was much more exhilarating than wrenching his neck to the side to peer out a tiny window.

Once the plane leveled out, Suzanne stood and threw her head back, shaking her hair a bit.

"That was fantastic!" she said in a breathy pant.

Good Lord, she made it sound like a sexual experience.

When she glanced over at Robert, her eyes sparkled. Maybe she *had* gotten a thrill.

She crawled onto the instrument panel with her face right up against the glass, so she had a panoramic view. The grin on her face was such a contrast to the grief he had seen her going through for the past few days that he found himself smiling. And he pushed his face against the glass, too.

“Maybe we’ll see a riverboat,” she said as the plane crossed over the Missouri River. “Or a big barge with cargo.”

She scooted even closer to the glass. Without realizing it, she pushed her face through.

Robert freaked. “Are you kidding me?”

She jerked her head back and looked at him, her mouth gaping, her eyes bulging.

“That was incredible!”

“Well, don’t do it again,” he said.

“No, no,” she insisted. “It’s fine. You can’t even feel the wind blowing. You’re just floating in space.”

This time, she pushed her whole head out.

He watched as she rotated her head all around, looking in every direction. And she was right. Not a hair on her head moved.

Tentatively, she eased her shoulders out, then pulled an arm through. She turned and waved at him, then beckoned him to join her.

Dear God, how did he get himself into these predicaments? Pressing his nose close, he moved through the windshield to his cheeks. Then, holding very still, he swiveled his eyes side to side.

Suzanne was right. He didn’t feel the wind at all. Stretching his neck, he pushed his head all the way out.

He recalled the scene in the movie Titanic, when Kate Winslet stood on the bow of the ship, and how corny he thought it was. But damn, if he didn’t feel like he was gliding through space. The only thing missing was the rush of wind on his cheeks. Of course, at the speed they were traveling, his cheeks would probably get ripped right off his face.

The noise from the engines was too loud to carry on a conversation with Suzanne, but he gave her a thumbs-up. Naturally, she couldn’t leave well enough alone. She acted like she was wriggling her torso out of the glass, then when she got to her waist, she pretended to press hard against the windshield, like she was stuck. Gritting her teeth, she

heaved her legs up and out of the window. Once she was completely outside the plane, she perched on the nose.

"Oh, no," Robert mumbled as he waved his hands. "I'm not going any farther."

Thank God she didn't insist. He wasn't willing to gamble with incontinence.

As they flew above the cloud line, heading east, the day faded. Robert couldn't recall the last time he'd remained totally still like that, with nothing to do but watch the color blue gradually transform from azure to indigo.

At one point, he tensed, as though all the muscles in his body had locked up in panic. A feeling of urgency washed over him; someplace he needed to be or something he had to do. It was as though time had wrapped its fingers around his neck. Get busy! Do something!

But he'd been cut loose. He was no longer tethered to his business or his family. The world was revolving without him, and it would for a very long time. Settling back against the glass, he watched the indigo ease imperceptibly to black.

Once it was dark, he ducked back inside the cockpit.

Suzanne sat on the top edge of the pilot's control panel with her legs dangling outside the windshield so she still had a ringside seat in case she saw anything. Her toes swished from side to side with anticipation, like a child enjoying something for the first time.

"So, what did your husband do, for a living?" Robert asked.

"He was a contractor. Built houses. Sometimes did big remodeling jobs."

"I guess he built your home, too."

"Five homes," she said. "He'd build one and we'd live in it for a few years, and then he'd want to try something new. More modern, with the latest updates. Solar panels, heated floors, you know."

Robert nodded. Then he decided to get nosy, like Maggie always did.

"How did he die?"

"It was pretty awful," she said. "He was cleaning our gutters and slipped on some wet leaves."

"He fell off the roof?"

Suzanne nodded.

"Geez! Did you see him fall?"

"No. I was working in the front yard. Phil was on the back of the roof. The house was built into the side of a hill, so it was three stories high, where he fell."

"God, what a way to go."

She leaned her forehead against the glass of the windshield.

"I blamed myself for a long time. If I'd found him sooner, he might have lived."

She stared out into the darkness, like she was living it all again. Robert didn't know what to say. 'I'm sorry' didn't seem to cut it, so he racked his brain for something more meaningful. In the end, though, that's all he could come up with.

"I'm sorry."

Slowly, she shook her head.

"He never yelled or screamed. He just fell. I came around the house with a wheelbarrow of compost and he was—" She gestured with her arm. "—lying on the ground."

She studied her hands for a moment, and Robert wondered if she might start crying. But she didn't. She raised her head and stared back out the window.

It dawned on Robert that she didn't expect him to offer cosmic words of wisdom. She just wanted someone to listen to her story, and maybe understand how she felt.

"The doctor assured me he died instantly, that he never felt a thing, but I never believed him. Not until I was in the accident. I saw that huge car coming right at me, but I never



felt a thing when it plowed over Angie's car. I don't even remember the impact. So maybe Phil didn't suffer."

Pulling her head away from the glass, she turned toward Robert.

"And now Angie's doing the same thing," she said. "Blaming herself for my death. Wondering if I suffered."

"I don't think we can help doing that," Robert said. "When I saw Amanda get shot, I thought maybe it was my fault."

Suzanne did one of those nodding things, where her whole body rocked, not just her head. Then she shook off her sadness.

"I saw your daughter on the news. She looks like she's about Angie's age."

"Rachel. She's twenty-four."

Normally, Robert would have left it at that, or boasted about how business-savvy Rachel was; what an asset she was to the Audrey's Corporation. But somehow those descriptions of his daughter sounded like blather now. They were facts about Rachel, but they didn't really give a true picture of her.

"She's so talented," Robert said. "She has this kind of sixth sense about colors and fabric combinations that most people don't have."

"You sound very proud of her."

"I am."

"And does she have a boyfriend?"

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sliding glass doors at LaGuardia Airport whooshed open. Robert and Suzanne tagged along behind a huddle of passengers leaving the terminal. Outside, a recent snow had turned to slush. Tires of rushing cars threw showers of dirty water onto the windshields of cabs waiting for fares.

A businessman in overcoat and leather gloves dashed for the first cab in queue at the curb. A woman in high-heels staggered sideways when a gust of wind slammed into her.

It wasn't until they'd hit the main terminal, that Robert had stopped spilling his guts about his family. Suzanne never batted an eye when he told her Rachel was gay. In fact, she told him about her great-auntie Ruth who never got married.

"She had a companion—that's what my parents called her friend—who shared a house with her for nearly forty years. But if you'd suggest that she was a lesbian, my parents would have had a fit. In fact, they're adamantly opposed to same sex marriage." Suzanne shook her head. "I guess people only see what they want to see."

Now, standing at the curb, they had some decisions to make.

"We may as well stay at the Plaza," Robert said. "I'm sure you'll want to see Central Park. And it's on all the bus lines."

"The Plaza Hotel? Like the movie?"

"That's the one. Sorry I couldn't call ahead for a limo," Robert teased.

Suzanne was so excited about being at the Plaza that she stepped off the bus before it even stopped out front. And as Robert had suspected, she leaned way back to get a look at the hotel's façade. Then she took it a step farther by floating up the front of the building, peeking in rooms that had their curtains open.

“Get down here!” Robert called.

And she did suddenly swoop back to the sidewalk, but by the expression on her face, it wasn’t his angry command that had brought her down.

“My goodness,” she said, her voice a bit breathless. “I didn’t know old men had that kind of stamina.”

“Perhaps you’d like to use the front door, like a normal person,” Robert said. “And please try to remember that this is the Plaza, and act accordingly.”

She guffawed like he’d just told the funniest joke.

The cavernous lobby with its Baccarat chandeliers and elegant split staircase to the mezzanine held Suzanne spellbound, but only for a moment. She zipped from the gold filigree elevator doors to the champagne bar, then up the staircase so she could glide back down, her left arm cocked and palm up like some snooty duchess.

Even if people had been watching, Robert imagined that she would still have strutted through the lobby.

At the bell captain’s stand, she requested a wake up call.

“For a fee,” Robert told her, “A butler will come to your room, deliver coffee, open the drapes, draw a bath and lay out your clothes.”

“He would not.”

Robert nodded, suppressing a smile.

Suzanne insisted on snooping through every room in the hotel.

“You go right ahead,” he told her. “Just don’t leave the building. If you get lost, you can’t stop someone and ask for directions.”

She saluted him. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Robert meandered to a secluded corner of the lobby and pulled a Bela Lugosi. He’d gotten used to the idea that he never got tired or slept, but sometimes when things got really slow, he’d just shut down, tuning out sights and sounds. He began referring to it as a ‘Bela Lugosi’ because it

reminded him of a bat hanging upside down in some darkened corner.

At the crack of dawn, Suzanne was back in the lobby, raring to go.

“So how was your tour of the hotel last night?” he asked.

“A little disappointing. Most of the rooms were dark, and the heavy drapes were drawn, so I couldn’t see anything. I peeked into the Grand Ballroom, but there wasn’t much to see.”

“No, I don’t suppose. You’ll have to wait until they’re setting up for an event.”

She didn’t appear satisfied with that answer.

“Tell you what,” he said. “We’ll get back here before dark this evening and you can snoop then.”

She smiled, totally missing his dig.

Rush hour was in full swing outside. Cabs were lined up two-deep in front of the hotel. Robert gave a man in a Kenneth Cole cashmere-blend topcoat a wistful sigh as the man slipped into the back of a cab and was whisked away to a meeting somewhere.

Suzanne had already darted across four lanes of traffic and was standing at one of the horse-drawn carriages at the park.

“Let’s go for a ride!” she said.

First Robert looked up the sidewalk, then made a turn to look the opposite way.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s interested in hiring a hack this early in the morning.”

When her mouth turned into a frown, he mumbled, “Maybe later.”

As they strolled under the bare trees of the famous mall, Suzanne gushed, “I’ve seen this so many times in movies. And now I’m actually walking right down the middle of it.” She spread her arms wide to take it all in.

“Perhaps you’d like to twirl with your arms out wide,” Robert said.

It served him right when she actually did spin.

She saw a large banner for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and immediately wanted to go there.

“Mmmm,” Robert stalled. “Don’t you think Maggie will want to go, too?”

“You’re right,” she nodded. “Better wait on that.”

He blew out a silent breath at that near catastrophe. It had taken hours to tour the dinky museum in the suburbs of St. Louis. He imagined it would take days to get through the MET.

He also steered Suzanne away from the zoo, knowing that she’d want to gawk at every animal in the place. Instead, he took her to the park’s classic carousel. Hot or cold, rain or shine, there were always children riding the painted horses.

Suzanne paused to watch the children’s faces as they rode by, smiling and squealing for their mothers or nannies to watch.

A young boy raced to his mother, sitting on a park bench, and stuck his foot forward for her to tie his shoe. The instant she bent over, a young punk appeared from nowhere, reached over the back of the bench, snatched the woman’s purse, and tucked it under his jacket.

She never saw a thing.

“Oh, my God!” Suzanne cried as she ran toward the woman. “Your purse! He’s got your purse!”

But the woman was oblivious to Suzanne. She sat up with a smile on her face, then finally glanced down and realized what had happened.

“He’s right there!” Suzanne screamed, her finger pointing at the kid as he ambled away. “Right there!”

Frustrated, she wheeled around to Robert.

“We’ve got to do something!”

“Like what?”

Clenching her fists in frustration, Suzanne growled at him, then turned and ran after the punk. She caught up with him, skirted around in front, and skidded to a halt. The kid walked right through her, of course.

She leaped onto his back and tried pounding on his shoulders, but it was useless. Robert followed her halfway to the ice rink before she finally gave up and slid off the thief's back.

Robert sidled up to her.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

"I wanted to help."

"I know."

A look of utter frustration furrowed her brow. He braced himself for a tirade. *Why didn't you stop him? You should have done something.* Or perhaps she would sulk for the rest of the day.

She did neither.

"How awful to live in a city where you have to be on your guard every second," she said. "I used to leave my purse in the grocery cart all the time while I shopped." She clicked her tongue. "I wouldn't last a minute in New York."

As they strolled back towards the south entrance, she clapped her hand to the side of her head.

"I can't believe I jumped on his back. You must have thought I'd lost my mind."

"No!" Well, maybe.

"I suppose I looked pretty ridiculous slapping and kicking at him like that."

"You reminded me of Catwoman."

"Catwoman? Really?"

Oh, great. Now Suzanne would get all defensive, looking for some deep, hidden meaning in his comment. But she had a smile on her face, like she was flattered. Robert took a chance.

"Yeah. She kind of pounced on people, didn't she?"

"I don't know. I didn't watch the show."

“Me either.”

Suzanne giggled.

“You never saw her?”

“Well, I’ve seen pictures. You know, in the cat suit. And the way you were clawing and hissing at that kid, it’s what I imagine she did to the bad guys.”

She meowed, then pretended to lick her hand.

At the entrance to the park, Suzanne asked, “Where to next?”

“I thought we’d catch one of those double-decker buses and take the tour.”

“Great! For someone who doesn’t know much about New York,” she said, “you know a lot.”

They were waiting at the curb when Suzanne turned to Robert.

“So, am I more of a Julie Newmar Catwoman, or Lee Meriwether?”

“Neither,” Robert said, going for points. “Michelle Pfeiffer, definitely.”

Wrinkling her nose in a sneer, Suzanne said, “Let’s try and keep our flattery in the right decade at least.”

The bus had just turned onto Seventh Avenue when the driver announced that Times Square was coming up, and right away Suzanne wanted to get back off.

“We just got on,” he said.

Next was the theater district and Suzanne got antsy for a closer look.

“Matinees aren’t until two o’clock. There won’t be anything to see this morning,” he told her.

Then, of course, she saw Madison Square Garden in the distance.

“Maybe we should just get off the bus and walk,” she suggested.

"Maybe we should take the whole tour so you can see where everything is you want to visit."

Good God, she'd be dragging him from one end of the city to the other for the next eight days. He had to come up with an excuse to ditch her, quickly.

She squinted her eyes at him. "You don't like sightseeing, do you?"

"Not particularly."

"Why not? Did your parents drive away and leave you at the Grand Canyon?"

"No."

"Didn't you go on vacations when you were a child?"

Robert shook his head.

Suzanne slapped at his knee. "Are you going to make me drag a conversation out of you, one syllable at a time?"

"What do you want to talk about?"

Now her shoulders sagged and her eyes rolled up nearly under her eyelids.

"Did you ever go to the beach with your cousins and aunts and uncles? Or spend Christmas with your grandparents?"

Puffing his cheeks out, Robert blew a breath.

"Okay. I never met my grandparents on my mother's side until her funeral." He bobbed his head as evidence that he found the conversation annoying. "They weren't really there to bury their daughter, though. They came so my grandmother could retrieve some 'family heirlooms'. Jewelry that had been handed down through the generations.

"You should have seen the way she tiptoed through our house like an old frump, turning her nose up at our furniture, even the drapes. She had her hands balled at the waist so she wouldn't touch anything and catch a horrible disease, like poverty. She even used my grandfather's silver pen to lift the lid of my mother's jewelry box."

"My God!" Suzanne exclaimed. "What a bitch."

"Yeah. The worst thing was the way she looked at me, like I was dog shit on the bottom of her shoe. I was only



fourteen, for Godsakes."

Much to Robert's dismay, his voice cracked. He turned and peered over the railing of the bus at Macy's gigantic department store.

"There you go," he said without turning to look at Suzanne. "You be sure and come back and check out the parade next Thanksgiving. You can stand in the freezing cold with millions of tourists waiting for a giant balloon to pass overhead."

He didn't feel it, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lay her long fingers gently on his knee.

"Why was she so hateful?"

"She was mad at my mother and decided to take it out on me, I guess. I can still see that pinched mouth, those wrinkles all around her lips, while she spewed out the story of my mom. I'd never been told the whole story, but evidently, she was a wild child out on Long Island where she grew up. When she got pregnant at seventeen, her mother was too ashamed to let her stick around. So they sent her to my aunt's home in Kokomo where she was supposed to have the baby, give it up for adoption, and be back in time for high season the next summer."

"But she didn't," Suzanne said.

He shook his head. "She wanted to keep the baby. Me. There was a big row at the hospital, I guess. Screaming, crying, who knows? In the end, my aunt told my mother she was on her own. I'm sure they all thought my mom would come to her senses.

"Instead, she somehow met my dad and he made an honest woman out of her."

"Is that what he said?"

"He never said anything about it. But my mom told me bits and pieces. I knew he wasn't my real father. I think she told me as a way of justifying why he didn't seem to care about me as much as she did."

"Do you think he loved your mother?"

“Oh, yeah. At least in the beginning. I remember when I was just little, how he loved to brush her hair. You could see it in his eyes. But not in hers.”

“She didn’t love him back.”

“I suppose she tried. Mostly, I think she felt obligated, you know, since he’d practically taken her in, adopted her child.”

Robert tilted his head back, thinking through his past. “I wonder when he finally gave up hope that she would love him back.” He chewed thoughtfully on the corner of his lip. “What a putz. Here was this hick farm boy from Indiana, hoping that this gorgeous brunette—a wealthy socialite from the Hamptons—would fall in love with—”

He stopped. The photo of Amanda on the chaise lounge in the champagne gown, her arm tossed overhead, slashed through his mind like a bloody claw.

Standing abruptly, Robert muttered something about checking out the Empire State Building, and slipped off the top of the double-decker bus.

Suzanne ran after him, calling his name several times before he stopped.

“What just happened?” she asked.

He turned and kept walking, his stride long and fast.

“I was a dumb putz, too.”

“What?” she asked, trotting to keep up.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

Inside the building, he waited at the elevator with a gaggle of tourists, thinking she wouldn’t talk in front of other people. He was wrong.

“Whatever it is,” she insisted, “it seems quite important to you.”

As the crowd pushed to get onto the elevator, Robert rose through the ceiling and sat on the edge of the elevator itself. He stared up the shaft.

“Did you love your husband?”

Suzanne sat next to him. “Yes I did.”

“Did he love you?”

“Yes.”

Her quick answer irritated Robert. “How do you know?”

A slow smile rose on her face, with a flicker of sympathy tucked behind it.

“I’d like to say ‘I just know’,” she said, “but I think that would make you even more irritated. So...”

She rubbed her hands together as though she was searching for a comment. The elevator wooshed up through the dull light, passing floor numbers.

“Okay, here’s one,” she said as they shot by the seventh floor. “Phil wasn’t great about complimenting me if I’d spent a lot of time on my hair, or maybe I was wearing a new skirt. But he never cringed either when I was dressed like an old bag lady. Or when my breath smelled. He loved me.” She tapped her chest. “Not all this.” She swept her hands down from her head to her feet dangling off the side of the elevator.

“If I was going to the grocery store, he wanted to come along. If he was working in the yard, I grabbed my gloves and joined him.”

Robert shook his head. “That doesn’t sound like love.”

“Sure it is. If you’re happy being with someone, no matter what they’re doing, that’s a big part of love. I mean, flip it around. If you’re NOT happy being with someone, you do everything you can to avoid being with them, don’t you?”

“You’re making it sound too simple.”

“No.” She pointed a finger at him. “You’re trying to make it much more complicated than it has to be. What do you want me to say? That love is passion, and hot, steamy sex, and candle-lit dinners?”

“Why not?”

“Okay.” She held her hands up in defense. “I agree that nights like that can be a lot of fun. But it’s only a fraction of the whole life you have together. Most of your time is spent

earning money, and keeping a house. And usually raising kids.”

The elevator reached the top of the shaft, but Robert made no effort to stand. So neither did Suzanne.

“Maybe it’s easier to talk about love if you talk about kids,” she said. “You love them even when they cry all night long, or when they use a permanent marker on your walls. When Angie was thirteen, she screamed that she hated me. It hurt my feelings, but I didn’t stop loving her.”

“What about Robbie shooting his mother?”

“Well, now, that’s up to you,” Suzanne said. “You made it sound like the girl instigated the robbery and your son just got caught up in it. So if you want to forgive him—”

“Fat chance of that!” Robert snapped. “I hope he goes to jail for a long, long time. Maybe he’ll finally see what life is really all about.”

Suzanne puckered her lips, like Robert was some cantankerous old bastard, but she didn’t say anything.

“He’s twenty-six years old and he’s never done *anything*,” he complained. “I don’t mean just a job. He’s never put a dirty plate in the dishwasher; he’s never picked up a wet towel from the bathroom floor. And you know what’s really funny? He just killed the golden goose that made it all possible.”

Once the elevator stopped again at the ground floor, Robert pushed through the gray cement wall to the lobby, and then lumbered out to the sidewalk. As he stood wondering which way to go, Suzanne slipped up beside him. Now, he figured, she’d harp on him for not being a better father.

“That was fun,” she said cheerily. “Guess I can scratch the Empire State Building off my list.”

He glowered at her, hoping she would go away and leave him alone. But she just stood at the curb, her head jutting forward and to the left, searching for the next bus.

He relaxed his eyebrows. Why was he taking it out on her? It wasn't her fault that his family was so screwed up.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

She gave her head a frivolous half-shake, like he hadn't offended her.

"Where to next?" she asked.

"How about the Statue of Liberty."

Back on the bus, Suzanne babbled about every inconsequential building they passed. When she saw a bar she asked if Studio 54 was still around. All of the restaurants with sidewalk cafes made her wonder aloud what the proprietors did in the winter.

Robert turned in his seat and perched his elbow on the bar along the seat back.

"You think I should have done more to try and straighten Robbie out."

"Who am I to judge?"

"I did a lot to get Rachel on the right track. She was ready to run away from home, but I put her to work at our corporate headquarters, I dragged her to manufacturing plants and retail stores, anything to keep her and Amanda separated."

"Obviously that attention paid off."

"But I couldn't take on Robbie, too. He was just...so out of control. From the very beginning."

She gave a ready nod, like she was willing to believe anything Robert told her. He knew it was all an act.

"Okay, here's a great story." Robert crossed a leg, leaning closer to Suzanne on the narrow bus seat. "It was Christmas. The kids were out of school. Robbie was probably in the fourth grade, Rachel in second. Amanda wanted to make Christmas cookies. I guess she saw some Hallmark Holiday Special, and decided that was the perfect thing for a family to do."

Suzanne settled back against the seat and folded her hands in her lap.

"I was home," Robert continued, "so it must have been the Sunday before Christmas. Amanda bought the cookies already baked: stars, stockings, Christmas balls. All the kids had to do was smear icing on the cookies and decorate with sprinkles, right?"

"And by the time they were done, the kitchen looked like a war zone."

"No, no. Robbie didn't want to have anything to do with it. I mean, what little kid doesn't want to stick his finger into a bowl full of icing and lick it off?"

"That does seem a little strange."

"Yeah. But Amanda got it in her head that they had to decorate cookies, so she bribed Robbie. Said she'd let him open one of his Christmas presents if he helped. So he grudgingly picked up a cookie, spread the icing on so hard that the cookie broke, stuck one—*one* of those silver candy balls—into the middle of the cookie, and walked out of the kitchen."

"And I suppose straight to the presents under the tree."

"Oh, yeah. Meantime, Rachel is putting icing on her fingernails and dipping them into the sprinkles. And she takes the little candy stars and presses them into her cheeks. She's having a ball. But Amanda sees what she's doing, drags her over to the sink and washes it all off her hands."

Suzanne clicked her tongue. "Wow."

Raising his eyebrows, Robert gave her a little nod. "You thought I was exaggerating, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Remind me later to tell you about the only time I took my family to the beach."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A long line of tourists waited in a queue for the ferry to Liberty Island. Robert strolled right past them.

"This should be simple," he said to Suzanne. "Just stare at the base of the statue, and we pop over."

"No!" She grabbed at his arm. "I want to experience the ferry ride and everything, just like they do."

She pointed at the huddled masses in their heavy coats, stripped scarves and woolen mittens.

"Then get back in line," Robert said, making a motion to shove Suzanne to the back of the queue.

She giggled, and stuck her tongue out at him.

They boarded the ferry even though passengers from the island were still disembarking. Suzanne made her way to the wheelhouse with the captain of the boat so she would have the best view of the approach to the statue.

"Just like everyone else," Robert mumbled as he stood by her side.

"Well, after being in the cockpit of a 737, I've gotten accustomed to elite status."

An even longer line of visitors waited to get inside the statue. And for what? Most of them couldn't get any higher than the observation deck on the statue's pedestal. Only two hundred forty people per day were allowed the privilege of climbing the spiral staircase up to the crown. According to an information board near the dock, the statue was closed after nine-eleven and no one had been allowed back inside until the Fourth of July 2009.

Among the privileged few was a family of four that didn't look like they could make it up a single flight of stairs. The dad had a 'Chicagoo' accent as thick as his gut. The mother was wheezing after the first spiral, puffing out words of caution to her two little brats. The son insisted on counting the steps, but after about seventy, he lost track and wanted

to go back to start over. Red-faced and gasping for air like a dying fish, his mother could only shake her head no.

Robert didn't stick around to see if the guide with the group carried one of those portable defibrillators in his backpack. Forging ahead, he craned his neck to see up between the swirling stairs and the structure, at the wavy metal folds of Lady Liberty's skirt. After a couple flights, he simply shot up through the spiral to the top.

Inside the crown, Robert and Suzanne drifted from window to window, checking out the sights. In the distance, heavy clouds hung over Manhattan like a shearling pelt, the undersides darkened as though the wool had been dragged through the mud.

There really wasn't much to see, but tourists clicked away with their cameras at the dull skyline. People posed and smiled and offered to take group pictures for others. A guide meandered through the crowd answering mundane questions, like how many stairs were there—354, or how tall was the statue—151 feet, like they were taking notes for a quiz.

Robert quickly got bored and motioned with his head that he was leaving. Suzanne followed.

"You know," she said, "I couldn't help but notice the door that was barricaded with a wire cage. What do you want to bet there's a stairway up Lady Liberty's arm?"

She wagged an eyebrow at him.

When he didn't answer, she said, "They have to get up there to change the light bulb, don't they?"

"And of course," he said, "You want to check it out."

"Of course!"

He drifted down the stairs, then swept an arm for her to go first through the blocked door with the bold sign that read: NO ENTRY.

They shinnied up a narrow ladder that did indeed lead to the torch. The view was no different, but Robert had to admit



that it was exhilarating to know he was someplace few others had been.

Back on the double-decker bus, they managed to go a good six blocks before Suzanne wanted to get off for Chinatown. Robert decided it was easier to just go along than continue fighting the tour-a-thon.

"Look at all the junk," he said, peering through a cluttered window. "This place alone must keep a hundred Chinese families fed for a year."

Suzanne wanted to go inside a kite shop, where paper birds, and dragons, and insects hung suspended from the ceiling.

Next door, a restaurant was slammed with customers dining on dim sum from roving carts. Plates of lo-mein and stir-fry were slung on other tables as fast as the waitstaff could carry them out of the kitchen.

"It's funny how we never feel hungry, isn't it?" Suzanne asked as they strolled further along the sidewalk.

"Yeah."

"I just wish I could smell it all."

"Me, too," Robert said. "Especially the fish heads and chicken feet." He tilted his head toward a grocery window.

"Oh, look!" He waved an arm to hurry Suzanne along. "Another kite shop!"

At Washington Square, Suzanne stood under the arch, leaning way back with her hands on her back for support. Thank God, no one could see her affected 'tourist' stance. Then she flapped her arms and pretended to fly up to the top where she alighted gently on the toe of her right foot like a ballerina. Robert joined her, sans the *on pointe*.

"You see all these pictures in magazines," she said, "but I never connected the fact that this park is smack in the middle of NYU. What a fabulous place to go to school."

"And right over there is Greenwich Village," Robert said.

That's when he got an idea.

"Come on, I want to show you something."

It took him a minute to get his bearings on West 8th Street, but finally he said, "This looks like the place."

He led Suzanne through a wrought-iron gate between two apartment buildings, and into a huge courtyard.

Spreading his arms wide, he gave a little 'ta-da'.

"This is where Alfred Hitchcock got his idea for the courtyard in the movie *Rear Window*. Or so I'm told."

"Oh, my God!" Suzanne exclaimed.

She drifted up to the second floor to peek into windows, then hovered overhead to take in the whole scene from the vantage point of where Jimmy Stewart must have sat in his wheelchair.

"Wouldn't it be fun to live in one of these?" she gushed.

"Yeah, if you like people spying on you."

By the time they got back to the Plaza, it was dark. The wind had picked up, and pedestrians were leaning into it, their coats held tight at their throats. Robert was half into his Bela Lugosi zone before he even got to the front door.

But then Suzanne squealed, "Look! Someone's hired a hack!"

Dear God, some tourists from Antarctica must have thought a ride through the park would be perfect on a balmy night like this.

Without waiting for Robert, Suzanne scooted back through rushing traffic and planted herself in the seat opposite the couple.

From their ruddy complexions, and Slavic accents, Robert guessed they were German. He slumped into the seat next to Suzanne and closed his eyes.

"You're not having any fun, are you," she said.

Stretching his feet out in front, he crossed his arms.

"I just don't know if I can do this for the next seventy-five years. I mean, sure, it was fine today. But tomorrow we'll be back out again. And the next day. It just sounds so tedious."

"How can you say that? You have a chance to visit every city in every state...in every country of the world!"

"That would be great if I worked for Conde Nast."

"But maybe when you come back, you won't want to work in the fashion industry. This is a golden opportunity for you to explore cultures, and foods, and buildings."

He tried to stay annoyed, but Suzanne's enthusiasm wouldn't let him.

"All right, all right." He threw his arm across the back of the seat behind her, and gazed up into the trees that formed a bough overhead. Thousands of clear lights twinkled in the bare branches.

The German couple across from them snuggled close, their hands intertwined over a heavy wool blanket that wrapped around their legs.

"I tried a few times to get my wife to take a carriage ride with me," he told Suzanne. "She never would, said the horses smelled. But I don't think she could muster up enough affection to hold hands with me that long."

"I'm sorry your marriage wasn't more fulfilling."

"I don't know what I expected. My folks never showed any affection for each other either. I think the more my mom watched those movies with all the fairy-tale romances, the more unhappy she got with my dad. She finally ended it."

"Divorce?"

"No, she killed herself by running her car into a telephone pole."

"Oh, my goodness. Are you sure it wasn't an accident?"

"She was driving on a county road that ran straight through Indiana farmland. It wasn't late at night. The pavement wasn't wet."

"How awful for you."

"Actually, it was months before I understood the significance of the fact that there were no skid marks on the pavement. She was escaping my dad and his Bargain Barn. She'd had enough of the mud and the stink and the attitude

of rural Indiana. She just gunned that old LeSabre and ran it into the only thing besides corn.”

\* \* \*

Robert came out of his Bela Lugosi trance the next morning to find Suzanne standing in front of him.

“You sleep in the lobby?” she asked.

“I’ve already seen the rooms.”

“Well, I’ve decided,” she said, “that we’re going to do whatever you want to do today.”

He was honored by her unselfish gesture, but he didn’t think she’d enjoy sitting around Marc Jacobs’ design house all day on the off chance that Jacobs, or someone similarly famous might show up.

“Why don’t we check out the holiday decorations in the department stores? We can start with the traditional stuff like Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s. I’ll save Barney’s for last.”

As he suspected, the windows had lots of winter scenes, and toy trains, and delighted children decked out in holiday finery. Robert let Suzanne ‘ohh’ and ‘ahh’ at the little skating bears and dancing snowmen, but he didn’t let her go inside the stores.

Not until they got to Barney’s where the really cutting edge designs set the pace for the rest of the country. The window displays were as bizarre as ever.

In one scene, a caricature of Elvis peeked out of the fireplace, and Martha Stewart’s head was being carved instead of a turkey.

“Now, we go inside,” Robert said after Suzanne had scrutinized every inch of the displays.

He stood just inside the front door to let her take in the massive ground floor.

“I imagine it will take the rest of today and most of tomorrow to get through all nine floors,” he told her.

Suzanne whirled on him. “Are you serious?”

“No. But that’s how I feel when someone suggests going to a museum.”

“Very funny,” she said.

“Let’s head up to the second floor. That’s designer women’s clothes. And third floor if you want to ogle evening wear. It’s up to you on shoes.”

She didn’t just ogle, she screamed, she squealed, she choked at thousand-dollar price tags.

“I used to wander through here for hours getting ideas for Audrey’s. I brought the whole family once for the holidays. Rachel was probably only seven or eight, but she fell in love with the avant-garde styles. That’s probably where she got her start.”

Robert drifted over to a fabulous red satin evening gown that draped elegantly at the waist. He examined the back, and the sash tied at the shoulder.

“Of course, we had to leave when Robbie smeared chocolate from a candy bar on the back side of a mannequin wearing white slacks.”

He rolled his eyes as he looked back at Suzanne.

“I paid for the pants.”

Suzanne loved looking at the shoes, even though most of the time she was either mocking the avant-garde styles or complaining about the pointy toes and extremely high heels.

She was horrified that women might spend hundreds of dollars on a small clutch, or sling a handbag the size of a suitcase over a shoulder.

And in the jewelry department, most of her comments were also about cost. “Who could afford eight hundred dollars for a pair of simple gold earrings? Target probably has a pair just like that for less than ten dollars.”

After years of watching Amanda spend money with abandon, Robert found Suzanne’s frugality almost endearing. But he couldn’t resist teasing her.

"Now Angie actually did have shoes when she went to school," he asked Suzanne.

She took the ribbing well. "Yes, she did. In fact, I paid over fifty dollars for a pair of Doc Martens that she insisted would last forever. They did, but the style didn't."

At the elevator, Suzanne asked Robert if he wanted to check out the men's wear.

With a dramatic sigh, he pressed the back of his hand against his forehead.

"That would be too painful. Seeing all those suits and ties and knowing I don't need them any more."

After they left Barney's, they cut over to Fifth Avenue and walked to Bryant Park, window-shopping at Prada, and Fendi's, and Sak's along the way.

Robert wanted to show Suzanne where fashion week used to be held, before it moved to Lincoln Center. Standing at the fountain in Bryant Park, he tried to explain how the whole area was all enclosed in massive tents twice a year.

"Sounds a little chintzy to me," she said. "Didn't it get cold inside?"

"You don't understand. It was first class all the way," he assured her. "And the parties after the show were incredible. You knew how important you were by which parties you got invited to."

"Like the parties on Oscar night?"

"Exactly." He gave Suzanne his best dead-pan look. "I never got invited to any."

By the time they boarded a bus back to the hotel, workers were flooding out of office buildings. Angry cab drivers honked at the evening gridlock. Robert thought of the many times he'd hustled to make a connection during rush-hour. It wasn't that he was anxious to get home; he was fired up to get to his next destination. Again he was plagued by uncertainty. Would his next life be as fulfilling?

He was still lost in his doubts when Suzanne asked him how he felt about Broadway plays.

“Ugh.”

“Don’t mince words with me, Robert. If you don’t want to go, just tell me.”

“I don’t want to go.”

She laughed, even though he could see she was disappointed.

“That’s okay,” she said, exaggerating gaiety. “You don’t mind if I go, do you?”

“What do you want to see? Comedy, drama, avant-garde, off-broadway. You want to see the Lion King as a musical?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that everyone always said they went to see a Broadway play while they were in New York.”

“They should have all the shows posted at Rockefeller Center,” Robert said. “Let’s go see what’s playing.”

Suzanne read through all the choices on a marquee in the lobby.

“They all sound good. Maybe I’ll do a different play each night.”

“You’re kidding! That could take weeks.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she smiled sweetly. She was teasing him. Then she thrust a finger in the air.

“Here’s an idea. What if we did a theater marathon? We start at a theater, and when it gets boring, we walk out.”

“Who gets to decide that it’s boring?”

“When you start snoring, I’ll know it’s time to leave,” she said.

“Very funny.”

“It’ll be fun. We’ll see how many shows we can cram into one night.”

Robert caved. “All right. You’re going to need someone to show you where the best theaters are, anyway. Let’s start with the Lyceum.”

“Technically,” Robert told her as they walked along West Forty-fifth Street, “The New Amsterdam is just as old, but the Lyceum is my favorite.”

To her credit, Suzanne gushed over the pilastered Beaux-Arts façade of the theater, and the undulating marquee out front. And once inside, she took Robert's arm as he escorted her up one of the marble staircases to a drapery-swagged box.

All the seats were taken, but Suzanne parked herself right in front at the rail. The storyline didn't hold her attention for more than five minutes. But the décor kept her riveted for a while.

Half an hour later, they cut over three blocks to the New Amsterdam and its gaudy Disney marquee. And then they dashed across the street to the New Victory for some steamy drama.

By midnight, overlapping stories and blaring music had Robert's head pulsing like an alien's brain in a cheesy sci-fi movie.

"Can we go someplace quiet where everyone's not shouting to the back of the house?"

"How about Sardi's? I heard that's where all the cool people hang out after a show."

"Exactly," Robert said. "And that's why we're not going."

He found a nice, dimly-lit bar with few patrons. As he went through the motion of slumping onto a banquette, Suzanne slipped into the booth across from him.

Propping her elbows on the table, she said, "What a shame we can't order a glass of wine."

"Or a double scotch."

Lounging back, Robert took a moment to enjoy the quiet.

"So, let me get this straight," he said. "The matriarch of the southern family murdered the Lion King because he was planning to rob a bank with his neighbor, who was having an affair with the anorexic teenager."

The lilt of Suzanne's laugh caused a flutter inside Robert.

"Why, Ro-but," she said, using the same southern accent as the woman in the play at the Shubert, "Ah do buh-lieve you enjoyed yourself this evenin'."



Oddly, she was right.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The instructions were simple. Anyone attending the December meeting of the Cryonics Center temps was to show up at the Sky Club at LaGuardia airport on the First. There, they would get more specific details on where the meeting was being held, and at what time.

Inside the luxurious lounge, the comfortable leather chairs, tastefully positioned for privacy, dazzled Suzanne. Glossy mahogany trim added a touch of color to the modern décor.

"I can't believe I'm actually in here," she whispered, as if she expected someone to eject her from the premises at any minute. "I tried to peek in the door of the first-class lounge in Madison once, but I couldn't see anything."

She wove through the lounge, past living passengers waiting for flights, to check out the baskets of snacks strategically placed.

"All we got was a tiny bag of pretzels." She swung around to a sideboard. "And look at all the fruit! Is all this free?"

Robert nodded.

"What about at the bar?"

"Sorry. You have to pay for your drinks."

Suzanne was pouring over the newspapers from all over the world when Robert spotted a small group of people gathered in a back corner. They chatted, laughed, nodded. It looked like a reception only no one had a cocktail.

"Come on," he said, holding an arm out for Suzanne. "Let's see if Maggie's here."

Sam spotted Robert first and broke away from the group to bustle over.

"Robert!" he said, extending his hand. His eyes were on Suzanne as he said, "Good to see you."

"And you," Robert said. "This is Suzanne Davis."

After a slight bow of the head, Sam introduced himself. "I wasn't aware we'd gotten another new member."

"I'm not one of you," Suzanne told him. "Robert and I met by accident."

"Har, har," Robert mumbled.

A majorly obese man waddled up next to Sam, holding out a hand toward Robert for another ineffectual handshake. Again, his eyes were on Suzanne.

"Wally Birnbaum, patient number sixty-eight," he said. "I had a BMW dealership in Passaic. Had a massive coronary just like my wife said I would."

He patted his belly to lay the blame.

Robert introduced himself and Suzanne. The moment he mentioned Audrey's clothing stores, Wally hooted.

"What kind of car did you drive, Robert?"

For a moment, he considered lying, but then admitted that he'd driven a Mercedes.

"Well, you can thank me for that," Wally said with a smile. "With all the money my wife spent in your stores, I'm sure I paid for it."

More people arrived; more introductions were made. Each time, the temp gave their name and what number they were in the cryonics process. Robert realized they were establishing the pecking order of who would get thawed out when.

According to the administrators at the Cryonics Center, the last people to be preserved would be the first ones revived. It had to do with improved technology. As time went on, the preservation process would become more sophisticated, more exacting. So basically, the last ones to be frozen would be the easiest to thaw back out.

"Hey, Randy," Sam asked one of the newly arrived. "What happened Sunday?"

"Oh, man!" Randy made a gesture of rubbing a hand over his bald head. "I was standing right next to Quomo when he told Pennington to throw that pass to Williams. The Packers

were already up by fourteen. They should have gone for the field goal."

"When I saw Pennington drop back to throw," another man commented, "I thought Quomo had lost his mind. So did the guys at ESPN."

Robert listened politely, nodding and smiling. From what he gathered, Randy had stood on the sidelines with the Green Bay Packers coach the whole game. After the lengthy, and boring analysis of the game, one of the other men turned to Robert.

"So, Atlanta. Guess you're a Falcon's fan."

"Not really," Robert said. "I never had much time to watch football."

Over the din of conversation, Robert could hear Asa Walker regaling another group about some golf tournament he had attended that fall.

The man to Robert's left chuckled. "It's a good thing Asa's dead. Can you imagine him on the sidelines of a tournament, bellowing at the top of his lungs like that?"

"He's quite a character," Robert agreed.

"So what was your handicap?"

Robert told the man he'd never learned to play golf, and everyone around him suddenly fell silent as though he'd just admitted to being a child molester.

Sam finally broke the silence. "Just as well. At least you don't understand the torture of having all this free time and not being able to play."

If Asa had arrived from the center, then Maggie must be around somewhere, too. Robert was about to break away from the sports jocks when an old gentleman with only a few remaining wisps of hair on the crown of his head eased into the huddle. He extended a hand to Robert and introduced himself.

"Stuart Greyson," he said, "patient number one. It's a pleasure to meet you, Robert. I'll be introducing you at the meeting. We usually bring new members up to the podium

to say a few words, tell us your interests, hobbies, obsessions. It gives us all an idea of what you might like to do now that you're free."

He smiled, then turned to address them all.

"The meeting is at the Carlisle Hotel on the Upper East Side. Our meeting committee did a fantastic job of locating our venue for December, particularly since it's a Tuesday. They found a Christmas party scheduled in the Trianon Suite at seven o'clock tonight."

Before each meeting, a committee arrived at the city chosen during the previous meeting. According to Maggie, the committee searched hotels for a first-class event being hosted on the First, the day of their meetings. Once a venue was found, the temps held their gathering a couple hours before hand, so they could enjoy the accommodations instead of sitting in some gloomy, empty ballroom. A party at the Carlisle was definitely top notch.

"Be sure to check out the three-bedroom apartment in the tower while you're there," Stuart told them. "It takes up the whole top floor of the hotel. There are breathtaking views of Central Park as well as Manhattan.

"Just remember we start at four o'clock. Don't be late. The wait staff will be bustling around making last-minute preparations by six o'clock, so we want to be gone by then."

Once Stuart moved on to the next group of temps, Robert said, "Wow! He's the first man to be preserved?"

"No," Sam said. "He's just the first member from the Cryonics Center. Technically, the first patient was a man named Bedford, from California, but he was just frozen, without any preservatives. There were a few attempts at freezing bodies in the mid-sixties, but they were blocked by families or hospitals. Even ministers. You can imagine how hard it was to believe someone could be held in suspended animation. Hell, no one even owned a computer back then.

"Another group tried to freeze a woman who had already been embalmed, but obviously, that was a no-go.

"This Bedford fellow was a doctor who volunteered to be frozen. He also agreed to spend his final days in a nursing home. The perfusion was done right there, then the man was popped into the back of someone's station wagon and taken to a garage to be frozen. When the homeowner's wife found out there was a stiff in her freezer she went ballistic."

A few of the group chuckled. Suzanne was aghast, but Robert wasn't sure if it was over the primitive process, or the frozen guy in the chest freezer.

"I guess it was a real circus for a while," Sam continued, but eventually they got Bedford into a Dewar in Phoenix, and that's where he still is. I met him at an open house at their facility. He even sat in on a couple classes with me at Cal Tech, but he started getting nervous about his chances for a successful reanimation and dropped out."

"What *are* his chances of being brought back?" Robert asked.

"It's anybody's guess," Sam said. "But the procedures were so antiquated, even years later when Stuart was preserved. It will all come down to what can be retrieved from his brain."

"Come on, Sam," Randy said. "Admit it. Bedford's brain is going to be pudding when he gets thawed out. There won't be anything to retrieve."

Robert finally found Maggie sitting in a corner with another woman who was wringing her hands in despair. He and Suzanne stood discreetly to the side as Maggie assured the woman she was not at fault for something.

"I hope you're right," the woman told Maggie. "I'll never forgive myself if I caused that baby's death."

The woman glanced up, and when she saw Robert and Suzanne, she hopped to her feet.

"It was an accident," Maggie said. "You just happened to be there to witness it."

Relieved, the woman thanked Maggie and bustled away without even introducing herself.

"Hello, kiddos," Maggie said when the woman was gone. "Have you been enjoying the sights?"

"Who was that?" Robert asked.

"Oh, that's Brenda Fields. She hangs out with her son and daughter-in-law most of the time. She caught the daughter-in-law cheating on her son, and got a bit miffed. For the past two months, she's been trying to harass the wife. Finally, a couple days ago, the wife took a tumble down the stairs. Brenda thinks she caused the fall. And to make matters worse, the wife miscarried on her way to the emergency room. Brenda didn't know she was pregnant. I don't think any of them did."

"How awful," Suzanne said.

"She's feeling incredibly guilty about the whole thing."

"Do you think she did cause the wife to fall?" Suzanne asked.

"I really doubt it," Maggie said. "But even if she did, what's the point in making her feel bad? Nothing can be done now."

"Famous last words," Robert mumbled.

An enormous Christmas tree draped in gold ribbon and adorned with red satin balls stood in the lobby of the Carlisle. Maggie and Suzanne passed right through the gold ropes cordoning off the tree to examine miniature replicas of antique teddy bears and toy trains that dotted the tree here and there.

And once inside the Trianon Suite, she and Suzanne fluttered about, gushing over the white poinsettia centerpieces, and swags of garland over an art deco fireplace.

Promptly at four o'clock, Stuart Greyson stepped in front of the fireplace and asked everyone to take a seat.

When he thanked everyone for interrupting their busy schedules to attend, the group tittered with chuckles. Then Stuart introduced Robert as their seventy-second member, and motioned for him to come up front to say a few words.

Robert had been anguishing over this moment since they'd left the airport's executive lounge. What did he have to say to these total strangers? If he were addressing buyers, he'd be able to talk for hours about fashion trends. Or if it was potential investors, he could extol the many benefits of joining the Audrey's team. But what did he have in common with these people other than the fact they were all dead.

Rising to his feet, Robert waved off Stuart's invitation to come up front. Instead, he gave a brief nod to the crowd before quickly taking his seat again.

Thankfully, Stuart let him off the hook.

"I know someone who never passes up a chance to speak," Stuart said. "Sam Parker, come on up here and tell us what's happening in the world of technology."

Sam trotted to the front of the room, planting his feet apart as though he intended to stay a while.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "We are living in an intelligence explosion." He paused to scan faces.

"Oh, boy," Maggie muttered. "We're not just getting an update, we're getting the whole Magilla."

"Ten years from now, when I'm standing up here," Sam continued, "we'll all laugh at what we thought were technological breakthroughs, because everything will be so much *more* advanced. The rate of change we are experiencing in science, medicine and technology is not linear—one, two, three, four. No, my friends. We are seeing ever more rapid changes at exponential rates—two, four, eight, sixteen.

"Our first computers filled rooms, now they fit in our pockets and purses. And many scientists say that in the next twenty-five years, a computer will fit inside a blood cell.



“Impossible? Isn’t that what people said about going to the moon?” Sam crossed his arms, then raised a hand to tap his chin. “Isn’t that what your friends and family said when you decided to be cryonically preserved?”

As the crowd murmured in agreement, Robert glanced around the room. No one was surreptitiously reading their Blackberry under the table, or texting on their phone. He didn’t catch anyone glancing at his watch or fidgeting in her seat. How odd it felt to be in a group where no one had anywhere to go, and nothing to do but listen to Sam talk about the future.

“Here’s an interesting tidbit from Ray Kurzweil, the inventor and futurist,” Sam continued. “He said that in the year 2000, if he’d ordered a book online, it would have been shipped via FedEx. If he wanted it overnight, he paid extra. But ten years later, if he ordered that same book, he simply downloaded the information onto his e-reader in seconds. The same thing was true with music and movies. Those *were* physical products. But now they’re information products. And once we have full-scale nanotechnology, with the ability to reorganize matter and energy at the molecular level, we’ll be able to download a toaster, or a blouse, or a replacement panel for our solar heater.”

Sam began to pace in front of his captive audience.

“What about science and medicine? There are engineering companies out there right now building replacement tissues and organs in laboratories, other companies are experimenting with creating organs from stem cells taken from the patient who needs the organ. Still other companies have developed perfusates and protocols for long-term cryopreservation of human organs, tissues and cells at cryogenic temperatures. One day, a human heart will remain viable much longer than our current four to six hours, so the days of scrambling to assemble surgical teams, and jetting organs from one hospital to another will be over.”

Sam stopped and patted his belly with both hands. "Humans have a fat insulin receptor gene that tells the body to hold onto every calorie. Back in our distant past, this gene was a lifesaver because the next hunting season might be poor, the next harvest might be destroyed by storms or drought. But we don't need this gene anymore, and pharmaceutical companies are working on a way to turn this gene off."

Sam's enthusiasm had him wandering up and down between the tables now, waving his arms as he rattled off more information. "Some day we will have software programs to get our bodies into shape, we'll have gene therapy, designer babies. We are on the cusp of a nanoengineered device, the size of a blood-cell, that will cure type 1 diabetes. It's already being tested on rats."

As Sam wandered near Maggie, she faked a yawn, patting her wide-open mouth with her hand. Evidently, Sam got the message, because his arms dropped to his sides.

"My point is," he said, "we are speeding into a technological future that most of us cannot comprehend, much less predict. All we know is that every exponential jump gets us closer to being reanimated."

An appreciative burble of agreement rumbled through the room, although there was no applause. Robert had actually tried to clap before he realized it was futile.

Once Sam sat back down at their table, Stuart Greyson returned to the front.

"Thank you, Sam. It's always reaffirming to hear your positive outlook on the future." Stuart paused before continuing. "And now, hot from Hollywood, our link to the stars, Madeline Wingate."

A woman sitting directly behind Robert rose amid chatter from others nearby. Dear God, the woman was a walking advertisement for cosmetic surgery gone wrong. She had the gaunt cheekbones of skin pulled too tight, set against voluptuous lips bulging from too much collagen. Robert

guessed her age at mid-seventies, yet she flaunted perky breasts in what must have been a thirty-eight D. How many times had she had those babies hiked back up?

At the fireplace, Madeline began running through a list of Hollywood celebrities and their illnesses. Robert missed the name, but the folks in the row behind him burbled with excitement when Madeline mentioned some Hollywood icon who had recently slipped into a coma.

"Just last month," she said, "four of us were there when Alexander Jordan died. What a talented young man he was, to be struck down with lymphoma at such an early age. And so charming. He visited with us for over two hours. Told us absolutely scandalous stories about himself and Lily Cantrell. He had us laughing hysterically with behind-the-scenes stories from a movie he'd made with Joel and Ethan Coen."

Turning to Maggie, Robert whispered, "Is she serious?"

"Oh, yeah," Maggie nodded. "There are several death groupies among us. They keep tabs on who is dying so they can be on hand for the event. That's the only way they'll ever meet big-name stars. A couple guys do the same thing with sports legends. They want to meet their favorite baseball hero or golf pro. So when they hear they're sick, they go hang out nearby."

Robert snorted in disbelief.

"There aren't too many young athletes or musicians, though," Maggie said. "You never know when they're going to get shot by a girlfriend or overdose on drugs. Movie stars have more predictable diseases like cancer and AIDS."

"They hang around their deathbed waiting for them to kick," Robert said.

"Basically," Maggie replied. "Obviously, there are celebrity spirits out there, but unless you stalk them, how do you know where they are? It's not like you can read about what they're up to in the Enquirer or on some Internet chat line. Every once in a while, there's a dead celebrity sighting."

Someone swears they saw Paul Newman at the Indy 500 a couple years ago. And Madeline swears she met Gilda Radner at some department store. Says they're the best of friends now."

"Has anyone run into Elvis?"

Maggie laughed. "Not that I've heard."

Several other members took turns announcing their plans for the next six months. One man rallied last minute interest in the Super Bowl in January; a woman was organizing a trip on the Orient Express.

A man in the back of the room stood at his seat.

"Just a warning here," he said. "I went with a senate fact-finding committee to the Middle East. Let me tell you, there's nothing like a room full of politicians to make you glad you're dead."

Everyone laughed.

"Seriously though," he continued, "I wouldn't recommend a trip to the Middle East anytime soon. Even the dead ones hate us."

A young man, maybe in his mid-forties, sprinted to the front.

Maggie turned to Robert and said, "Check this guy out."

"Many of you know me," the man said. "I'm Eddie Baldwin. Several of you have requested information on the next shuttle launch. NASA is sending up a shuttle on February ninth to deliver yet another module to the International Space Station."

The noise level in the room rose to a raucous pitch of chatter.

"Oh, Robert!" Suzanne gushed. "We should do that!"

"Go up in the shuttle?"

"Yes! Did you ever, in your wildest dreams, think that one day you would get to go into space?"

Robert was too embarrassed to admit that he'd never had the slightest desire. Instead, he asked Maggie on his other

side, "Who is this guy? Was he an astronaut?"

"No. But he worked for NASA in the control room. He tried to get into the training program, but he had some kind of heart problem. I guarantee, when Eddie comes back, he'll command the first moon colony, or be chosen for a deep space voyage. He knows more than anyone else at NASA. He's either auditing classes at MIT or hanging out at Kennedy and Houston. Once they fix his ticker, there'll be no holding him back."

Stuart raised his hands to hush the crowd. "I promise we're just about done here, and then you can all get details from Eddie on the shuttle."

A woman seated next to Suzanne tsked the idea.

"I went with them two years ago. What an awful place," she bemoaned. "I was expecting something like the Starship Enterprise. But that Space Station is abysmal. Cramped passageways, cables strewn everywhere, on the floor, along the ceiling. And the sleeping quarters! My God, those astronauts sleep upright in these tiny closets, hanging in sleeping bags like bats."

After thanking Sam and Asa and Esther for their services, Stuart asked for volunteers to serve as greeters at the Cryonics Center until the next meeting in June.

"We also have to vote on where our next meeting will be," Stuart said.

People nominated Sydney, Paris, and London. When a husky man stood and shouted, "Katmandu!" everyone laughed.

"Good old Pete," Maggie said. "He suggests that every time. But over the years, we've learned that it's better to pick a city where English is common. It's tough enough getting around in a strange city when you can't ask anyone for directions. It gets a whole lot tougher when all the signs are in a foreign language."

Once Toronto was chosen for the June meeting, the group broke up. Sam cornered Robert. "You've got to meet Jess

Baxter.”

He ushered both Robert and Suzanne straight through the dining tables to a burly man standing in the back, his chest thrust out, his hands clasped behind his back like a general.

After quick introductions, Sam asked Jess, “When did you get back?”

A huge smile parted the man’s heavy beard and mustache. “About a week ago.”

“And was it incredible?” Sam asked.

“Yes, indeed.” Jess shook his head, the smile still radiating. “I still can’t get over how much preparation goes into a climb like that. You know, it took sixty yaks to haul all the teams’ provisions to base camp. And the sherpas are just amazing.”

The smile wavered into a smirk. “Although a couple of the climbers were total jerks. This one guy was always making exaggerated hand gestures at his sherpa, treating him like an imbecile. And he’d make disgusting cracks about his sherpa cozying up to his yak at night. One of the other climbers finally reminded him his life depended on that guide. Sure enough, on the way back down, the guy lost his footing and tried to self-arrest.”

Turning to Robert, Jess explained, “That’s where you roll onto your stomach as you’re sliding, and drive your pick into the snow. If the pick doesn’t catch, you roll again and keep driving that pick into the ice. Sooner or later, you can gain purchase and stop your slide. But this idiot panicked. Couldn’t roll. His sherpa went after him.” Jess pursed his lips. “Saved his sorry ass.”

“So, what was it like, being on top of Everest?” Sam asked.

The smile broke through the shaggy beard again. “It was fantastic. Unbelievable. I wish I could say breathtaking, but —” He shrugged, and Sam chuckled.

“They call it the death zone up there, don’t they?” Sam said.

Jess nodded. "The air is so thin, most men don't climb without oxygen these days. And that's after they've spent four or five weeks at middle camp, acclimating to the altitude."

"Five weeks?" Robert blurted. "What do they do all day?"

Robert got the same dull-eyed look he'd gotten from the golfer, and the football enthusiast, and now even Sam. The disbelief that Robert didn't find climbing Mount Everest the most fascinating adventure of all.

Then he got a simplified explanation, as though Jess were speaking to a child. "Well, they go on short climbs each day. They practice using their picks and ropes. They learn how to stop a fall or slide. And most important, they get acclimated to the lack of oxygen. Some of those climbers come into it thinking they're in top shape, but believe me, they come back to camp at night panting like dogs."

When Robert didn't react with the proper enthusiasm, Jess turned back to Sam.

"I wish I could have felt the cold, just for a moment. Or struggled to breathe in the air at the very top." As Jess spoke, Sam nodded as though he understood perfectly. "You can't truly grasp the experience until you've walked across a flimsy bridge and stared down into a chasm so deep you can't see the bottom. It's only when your heart is in your throat that you get a real sense of the risks."

More nods from Sam.

Robert took a quick peek at his wrist, but of course, his watch was not there. How much longer would he need to hang around these macho men before he could slip away?

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Robert spotted Suzanne and Maggie, conferring off in a corner.

"What are you two plotting?" he asked.

An anguished expression washed over Suzanne's face, almost like she wanted Robert to bail her out of something.

"I was at the Metropolitan Museum yesterday," Maggie said. "They have a fascinating Egyptian exhibit. It got me wondering about tombs that are supposedly cursed. Maybe its really just lost souls. Like Stan in Florida."

"That's fascinating," Robert said, going for a droll expression. "Why don't you go investigate that theory?"

She smiled at his insolence.

"I am. As soon as I can get a flight," she said. "I've been trying to talk Suzanne into going with me, but she's not interested."

"You don't want to roam through dark, musty tombs? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm going back to St. Louis to see how Angie's doing," Suzanne told him. "And then I think I'll check out some place warm. I'm tired of gray skies and slush."

"You can't even feel the cold."

"I know, but everyone else can. It makes my shoulders tight just watching people all hunched up and shivering."

"St. Louis is cold and rainy," Robert reminded her.

"I know," she said, then wagged her eyebrows. "But Cancun isn't."

"Cancun?" Robert snorted. "Are you going to go get wild with the college girls?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I'm going on a cruise. Maybe to Saint Thomas. Or Aruba."

The idea of being stuck on a cruise ship for a week made Robert cringe.



"Would you like to join me in Egypt, Robert?" Maggie asked.

"Heck, no. I definitely don't have a sense of adventure." He took a moment to glance around the Carlisle's lobby. "I guess it's too late to catch up with Madeline Wingate and her death squad."

"Come on, Robert," Suzanne coaxed. "It'll be fun. Calypso music, scantily-clad babes."

He returned her lascivious smile with a blank stare.

During the meeting, he'd listened to lots of people talk about exciting things to do, and exotic places to go. None of their suggestions had sparked an interest with him. His decision came down to one simple question. Did he want to part company with Suzanne?

\* \* \*

It was raining and gray in St. Louis, as Robert had pointed out in New York. Pedestrians had their umbrellas aimed at the assault, leaning into the wind.

The visit to Angie was just as dismal. Suzanne's father sat in the corner of the hospital room reading a newspaper while Suzanne's mother, Eloise, sat on the other side of Angie's bed, watching *The Price is Right*. Angie was asleep.

When the program ended, Eloise woke Angie to tell her it was time to get ready for dinner.

"What?" Robert blurted. "How does she get ready for dinner? Change into a fresh hospital gown?"

But he soon saw. Eloise came out of the bathroom with a washcloth and proceeded to wipe Angie's face. Then she carefully brushed her hair and pulled it back into a ponytail before painting on a little powdered foundation. She finished off with lipstick.

Draped over the back of the chair was a lacy pink cape which Eloise wrapped around Angie's shoulders and tied up with a jaunty bow to the side.

“Where did she find that?” Robert guffawed. “I don’t even think my dearly departed Aunt Esther would wear something like hideous.”

“I think my mother lived a previous life in the Victorian age,” Suzanne said.

Dinner arrived. There was a bit of arguing over Eloise trying to feed Angie, and Angie insisting she could do it herself, so a towel was draped over the cape and cinched tight at her neck.

“What’s all the fuss about?” Robert asked. “Did you have to dress for dinner every night when you were a kid?”

Angie managed to cut chunks of mushy meatloaf with her left hand, but more than half of her peas rolled out of her spoon before she got it to her mouth. Eloise was right there like a crow, snatching up the renegade peas and tossing them away.

Angie had pretty much finished off her pudding when footsteps in the hallway got granny into high gear. She rolled away the table, yanked off the towel, and hastily blotted Angie’s mouth just as Mark strolled into the room.

“I should have known,” Suzanne said. “My mother is playing matchmaker.”

For the first time, Suzanne’s father laid down the newspaper. The two men shook hands, and Eloise insisted Mark sit in the chair beside Angie.

After a chaste kiss to the forehead, Mark perched beside Angie and took her left hand in his.

“I spoke with your doctor,” he said. “He thinks you can go home by the end of the week.” He looked up to address Suzanne’s father. “If it’s all right with you, sir, I’d like Angie to come home with me for her recuperation. I can have a bed put in the den at my house. And I’ve contacted a convalescence service that can come by twice a day to check in on her. Help her with meals. See if she needs anything.”

“Oh, no,” Suzanne moaned. “That’s it. She’ll never break away from him now.”

“Why should she? He’s a great guy. He’s offering to play nursemaid, he’s willing to disrupt his home and his life to put her first.”

“You wait,” Suzanne said. “He’s got something up his sleeve.”

\* \* \*

Since their cruise ship didn’t sail until Sunday, Robert decided to drop in on Rachel in Atlanta. He played it safe and went directly to Audrey’s corporate headquarters rather than the house in Ansley Park.

The offices of the Audrey’s Corporation were sparsely decorated in quiet elegance: hardwood floors with plush area rugs, floor to ceiling glass with a view of the Peachtree Westin and Centennial Park beyond, and beneath accent spotlights, an oil reproduction of Amanda in the famous champagne gown, lounging on the chaise; the picture that had launched Audrey’s into the mega-corporation it was today.

He poked his head into his old office, now Rachel’s office, but she wasn’t there. An unfamiliar personal assistant sat at the desk out front, typing at her computer.

“Maybe she’s at lunch,” Suzanne offered.

“Let’s try the conference room.”

A staff meeting was in progress. Pictures of little girls in darling outfits were propped on easels along the wall. Robert recognized a couple manufacturers’ reps, a half dozen Audrey’s buyers, and possibly the attorney who had replaced Martin, all seated facing the easels.

Rachel stood at the head of the table and addressed the group as they munched on deli sandwiches.

“I’m tired of seeing little girls dressed in miniature versions of women’s clothes. I saw a young girl at a

reception last week. From a distance it looked like she was wearing a strapless gown. When I got closer, I saw that the dress was held on with a sheer mesh bodice and capped sleeves. The child could not have been older than eight or nine!

“What are we doing to these young girls? They think they’re all grown up by the time they’re twelve. They don’t play with dolls, they text on their phones. They don’t ride bikes, or play soccer, or jump rope.”

Rachel drifted to the first easel. “American Girl Corporation has an incredible market share on girls’ clothing from seven to fourteen. I want to get in on the trend, only at lower prices.”

She held up a hand when a buyer sucked in a breath to ask a question. “I’m not talking about the birthday parties, or the luncheons, or the dolls. I’m strictly interested in the clothing. Our advertising campaign will emphasize age appropriate activities.” She gestured to the easel.

The setting was a small park with a paved walkway. One girl in the picture wore roller blades, the other girl rode a scooter. They both wore shorts and knit shirts, but the shorts hung mid-thigh, not cut up to their butt cheeks.

How long had Rachel been playing with this idea? She’d never mentioned it to Robert. Did she think he wouldn’t approve?

He studied a picture board with two girls in frilly velvet dresses, standing in the lobby of an elegant theater.

“This is exactly how Amanda tried to dress Rachel. Like a little princess in puffy sleeves and satin sashes, right down to the Mary Jane shoes with lace socks.”

He shook his head slowly as he stared at the picture of a girl in a colorful striped sweater with matching striped leggings.

“All this time, I thought Rachel hated the clothes. But she was just rebelling against Amanda.”

"Maybe she craved some of the attention Robbie was getting," Suzanne suggested. "As a teacher, it never ceased to amaze me how inappropriately children behave when they want attention."

The meeting quickly wrapped up. A couple of the buyers pulled out their Blackberrys as they headed for the door. Rachel stayed behind to chat with the representative from the design house that had created her presentation, then strolled back to her office.

Her personal assistant followed Rachel to her desk.

"Jack Courley called, wants to reschedule for Tuesday. The Springfield store is still insisting you come for their Pioneer Days."

She glanced at the next pink slip in her hand and hesitated before telling Rachel, "Robbie called again."

Rachel sighed, then took the memo from her personal assistant.

"Thanks, Joanie."

Once she left, Rachel dialed the number on the memo.

Robert moved in closer to hear both sides of the conversation.

"What took you so long?" Robbie asked the moment he answered.

"I was in a conference, Robbie. I told you my schedule when you called yesterday."

"Did you talk to Briscoe?"

"No. I told you there's no point in talking to your attorney until you finish the program. You've only been in rehab a week, Robbie. You have to give it some time."

"I'm over this dump. You tell Briscoe to come up with a better plan or I'm leaving."

"We can't keep going over this every day, Robbie. You need to *successfully* complete rehab before your next court appearance so that Mr. Briscoe can show that you've not only gotten cleaned out, but that you're remorseful for your actions while under the influence of drugs."

"Yeah, yeah," Robbie blathered. "That's bullshit. The people here are cretins."

"Rockmore is the top-rated rehab facility in the Southeast, Robbie."

"Fuck you!" he screamed. "I've got to get out of here."

Rachel took a breath to calm her anger.

"I'm not going to return any more of your calls, Robbie. If you stole the cell phone you're using right now, please return it. And stick to the plan. The sooner you get straightened out, the sooner you can *get* out."

Robbie started to scream something else, but Rachel disconnected.

Robert turned to Suzanne.

"And you think Mark's a jerk."

"No, I think Mark's hiding something. Robbie's definitely a jerk."

"Thank you."

"Let's go see him."

"Are you kidding?" Robert said. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Morbid curiosity?"

"You go, I'll meet you in Ft. Lauderdale."

"It'll be fun. Think of all the satisfaction you'll get watching him endure withdrawal. He sounds like he's on the edge already."

Robert considered the possibilities: Robbie with the dry heaves, uncontrollable shaking, profuse sweating, all the ghastly symptoms shown in the movies. He would find that *very* satisfying.

\* \* \*

Rockmore was located an hour north of Atlanta. The owners had refurbished an old resort lodge in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, then added two single story wings off to the sides to house additional patients. It came

into view after Robert and Suzanne had trudged nearly a mile on a winding road through dense pine forest. There had been no signage other than a street number out on the county road.

"This is it," Suzanne said, obviously relieved that she hadn't been dragging Robert on some wild goose chase.

"They sure make it hard to find," he grumbled.

"It's a lovely setting. The tranquility is probably what these people need most. And being so secluded like this, it might discourage patients from wandering off."

"I'm sure the fine folks in the surrounding area insisted on that. No one wants a bunch of drug addicts in their neighborhood."

Inside, the lobby of the old hotel had been converted to a gathering place for patients. Two boys, probably in their mid-twenties, sat at a table playing cards. One of the boy's hands shook so hard, Robert marveled that he didn't drop his cards.

A large screen television dominated one corner of the room. A teenage girl sat curled up at one end of a sofa, watching a wildlife program with the volume muted.

"Do you think that's all the louder they can have the television?" Suzanne asked as she wandered closer.

"I'm sure they do all they can to keep these kids from getting riled up. Check her out."

The girl's knees were drawn up tight against her chest. Her eyes had darker circles than Angie's did after her accident. The girl didn't even look eighteen, but maybe that was because she was so thin that her body was shapeless. She wore a tank top and flannel pants even though it was almost January.

One hand held the other steady as she chewed on a fingernail. When a nurse walked nearby, the girl spit the nail at her.

Robert heard yelling down a hallway, and what sounded like a scuffle. Then Robbie came careening around the corner with a male nurse or orderly close behind. The orderly grabbed Robbie's arm.

"Get your fucking hand off me," Robbie snapped as he jerked his arm free. "Fucking moron."

"You're on thin ice, Malone," the orderly snarled back. "And I'll be the one to personally escort you to the door."

The orderly stomped over to a nurses' station, pulled out a folder, and began to scribble furiously.

Robert shook his head. "Another in what I'm sure is a long list of grievances against Robbie."

Robbie flopped onto the sofa next to the curled-up girl with such force that the thumb she was chewing on jammed into her mouth.

"Hey!" she said.

"Shut up!"

She licked her lip, then dabbed at it with a finger and checked to see if she was bleeding. Not that Robbie cared.

"That guy's a tool," Robbie huffed. "So's that doctor." He looked over the girl's head to see down the hallway. "I bet he's not really a doctor. Just some fuckwad that can't get laid."

The girl giggled but it sounded strained.

"He always wants to talk about my mom," she said. "Maybe he wants to fuck her."

"If he can get it up."

She spit another piece of fingernail in the general direction of the television.

"Well, it doesn't matter," she said, lowering her voice. "I'm leaving."

"Yeah, right."

"I am. I've got a friend picking me up during dinner tonight."

"Bullshit," Robbie said. "You can't just walk out."



She gave Robbie a glare like he was the moron. "Watch me."

"How are you going to do it?"

"I'm going out the door at the end of the hall."

"It's got an alarm."

"Duh. So what? I jump in the car and we're gone."

"What if they come after you?"

"This is rehab, not prison," she said. "They got their money. What do they care?"

"Sounds too simple."

"I've done it before," she said, searching her fingertips for a sliver of nail that she could get her teeth on. "Why don't you come with me?"

Robbie sat and gazed at the TV for so long that Robert decided he hadn't heard the girl's invitation.

But then he finally said, "I better not. My attorney will have a cow."

"Whatever."

Suzanne was proud of Robbie for sticking to his guns. All Robert could do was laugh.

"The night is young," he said.

When a bell chimed, all the slugs in the lounge heaved out of their seats and shuffled to a dining room. Robert and Suzanne followed Robbie. He sat next to the girl, who was propping her head up with her hand like she didn't feel well. She took a couple bites of her meal, then dropped her fork.

"I'm gonna barf," she announced, and dashed out of the room.

A nurse sitting one table over watched the girl flee with her hand cupped over her mouth. After giving it five seconds consideration, the nurse went back to her meal.

Robbie sat with a fork gripped in one hand, his knife in the other.

"The battle begins," Robert said. "I give him thirty seconds."

Sure enough, Robbie calmly laid his utensils down, wiped his mouth, and casually stood.

"I'll go see if she's okay," he said to the nurse, and slowly strolled to the door.

"Oh, no!" Suzanne said.

"Oh, yes."

He and Suzanne scurried to watch. The girl was already at the end of the hallway. She pushed open the door and immediately an alarm went off.

Robbie lowered his head and sprinted after the girl. An orderly shouted for Robbie to stop, but he surged on, then dove into the open back door of a car and it sped away before he could even get the door closed.

"That's my boy," Robert said as they watched the taillights.

"I don't believe it! He's jeopardizing his court case."

"You don't get it. He doesn't care. He assumes someone will fix it. They always do."

"You always did."

Robert held up his hands in surrender. "Not me. This is all Amanda's doing."

"I want to see where he's going."

Before Robert could even object, Suzanne disappeared.

"Oh, for the love of God," he huffed. Then he concentrated on the taillights far in the distance, and zipped forward to catch up.

\* \* \*

The car parked in an underground garage of some fancy Buckhead highrise. Robert had ridden on the roof, refusing to get in the car with the others.

Robbie and the girl tumbled out of the back seat while the driver and his girlfriend staggered toward the elevator.

Suzanne eased out of the empty car and stood watching the four stumble and giggle.

“Happy now?” Robert asked from the roof.

Unaware of his presence, Suzanne jumped. Then she furrowed her eyebrows at him. “I thought you didn’t want to know what he was up to.”

“I’m not here for him,” Robert said. “I’m here for you.”

Her jaw dropped slightly at the comment, and Robert pinched his face into a snarl. “Can we just go to the airport?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

At the port in Ft. Lauderdale, hundreds of people waited in a holding area to board the ship. Robert wasn't sure he'd ever seen so many Hawaiian shirts and straw purses in one place before.

He and Suzanne headed right for the front of the line. Just beyond the gangplank, the ship's photographer had stopped a large family to take a picture. It took a bit of juggling to get grandma and grandpa front and center, with mom and dad flanking the right and three bratty kids all jostling each other on the left. When one of the boys continued to tease his sister, dad reached over and whacked the kid on the back of the head. He immediately turned around and smiled for the camera.

"Could it really have been that easy?" Robert asked.

First on Suzanne's agenda was to investigate every inch of the ship. That was okay with Robert, since they had to wait for the other two thousand and sixteen passengers to get on board before the ship sailed.

It really wasn't any different from a five-star hotel, but Suzanne oohed and aahed over wide staircases and chandeliers. Not only did she check out the main dining room, she went into the kitchen. The staff was already busy slicing and dicing for dinner.

On another deck, a small café had laid out a buffet of hot items, and cold make-your-own sandwiches, salads, and ice cream sundaes.

As passengers boarded, they dropped off their carry-on bags and made a beeline for the food.

"Good God," Robert said as a rather portly man balanced a plate of hot foods in one hand, and a seven-layer sandwich in the other. "Let the feasting begin."

"I've always heard about the food on these cruises," Suzanne muttered. "Look at that child."

They watched as a little boy glopped every syrup available over a small scoop of ice cream.

"He'll be sick before the ship leaves port," Suzanne said.

The tour continued deck by deck. Robert was dismayed to see all the bars. There was a nightclub-type bar with a stage for shows; there were bars near every swimming pool; and cute little grass shacks that offered beer and wine.

"I'd hate to be an alcoholic," he said. "Or dead. All this booze, and nary a drop to drink."

Every available space on the upper decks was lined with lounging chairs, all perfectly aligned and waiting for sunbathers. At the front of the top deck, Suzanne stopped at a door to read a sign: 'Nude sunbathing. Adults only'.

She turned and smiled at Robert.

"Don't you even say it," he warned.

After Suzanne found the largest stateroom on board and claimed it as hers, they wandered back to the gangplank.

People were still pausing for a photo before getting shuffled off to their cabins.

A woman in a wide-brimmed hat caught Robert's attention. She wore a Spandex tube dress in fuchsia that rode high on her hips. Her heels had to be four inches.

"Dang! I hope we don't hit any rough water," Robert said. "Or she's going down."

She lolled on the arm of some greaseball with dark slicked-back hair and a knock-off of a Nat Nast shirt. The two paused for their photo, and she pressed her ample bosom against his arm.

"Must be a boyfriend," Suzanne said. "Or newlyweds."

"I'm guessing she either answers the phone at his used car lot, or she's the one who sprays the deodorant in the shoes at his bowling alley."

Right behind the couple, a husky man wearing what looked like a mechanic's coverall stomped up the gangplank, talking way too loud.

"Filthy whore," he said. "You goddamn cheating slut!"

“Whoa!” Robert said.

“How did he get past security?” Suzanne wondered.

The man and woman ignored his ranting and locked lips for another picture before moving on.

“Don’t you walk away from me,” the mechanic yelled.

Suzanne shook her head. “Do you think he’s talking to the woman in the hat?”

“I can’t believe they’d let him on board dressed like that.”

The burly man stormed right past the cute girl with the camera and the bell captain directing passengers to their rooms.

Suzanne’s mouth dropped open, but Robert laughed. “Looks like we’ve got another ghost on board. Maybe they’ll seat us together.”

Robert and Suzanne stood at the railing with three thousand other people and watched the sun set as the ship pulled away from the dock. As Suzanne promised, Calypso music tinkled from speakers. Kids chased each other between deck chairs. Couples snuggled arm-in-arm, dreaming of idyllic days to come on the open sea.

Once the skyline began to fade, most of the passengers hightailed it to one of the bars or for the next all-you-can-stuff-in-your-gullet meals. Robert and Suzanne stayed on deck.

As he gazed out at the churning water below, Robert said, “I guess you’re waiting for me to make some comment about Robbie.”

“You were pretty quiet on the flight. I figured I should just leave you alone.”

“I kept telling you what a loser he is, but I guess a small part of me hoped the rehab would get him turned around. I knew better than to get my hopes up, but I still did.”

“I was disappointed, too,” she said. “As soon as Robbie and his friend got in the car, the girl in the front seat gave them both some pills, and then they passed around a pipe.

What kind of friends are eager to bring you back down into the mire?"

"He's always associated with losers. Even as a little kid, he was always in the play-group that got time out for misbehaving. If paint got spilled, if a fire alarm went off, you can bet Robbie was right in the middle of it."

"You always point out the negatives of Robbie, but surely you can remember some good times, too."

Robert guffawed, but he knew Suzanne wouldn't let him off the hook that easy.

"I guess when he was a baby, he was pretty cute. And Amanda was still a semi-celebrity. I was golden, opening new stores every six months. We'd take Robbie with us for grand openings and the shoppers loved it.

"Robbie really ate up the attention, too. Even before he learned how to talk, he was babbling to strangers. Everyone adored him."

"He was a star," Suzanne said.

"Exactly."

For a while, Robert studied the wake the ship made on the water, as it churned to a foamy white and then settled back into ripples.

"But then some tabloid ran a picture of Amanda on the beach. Her hips had gotten pretty big, and she had quite a belly of fat. It was really cruel, and she took it hard. She started refusing to go to openings."

"Those newspapers are so vicious. Every time I go to the grocery store, they're lambasting someone. Usually women."

"I think one of the biggest reasons she got pregnant again was to have an excuse for looking the way she did. That sucks, doesn't it?"

"Women struggle so much more than men do with self-esteem."

"After Rachel was born, Amanda was huge. And this was before personal trainers and all the fancy gyms. There were a few exercise places in Atlanta, but Amanda couldn't bring

herself to go there. Afraid she'd be recognized. Now all the fatties are on TV flaunting how bad they looked before they joined some weight loss program."

"She hates the way she looks, then she overeats, then she hates herself even more."

"You got it," he said. "And with Rachel in the mix, Amanda was exhausted. I remember coming home lots of times to find all three of them crashed out on the bed, sleeping."

"What did Robbie think of Rachel?"

"Oh, he hated her. The little prince got kicked to the number two slot, and he didn't like it."

Robert turned sideways at the railing to look at Suzanne.

"You know, that's when he started getting so obnoxious. He'd do crazy things, like tipping over her bouncy seat, or yanking a bow so it pulled her hair and made her cry."

"It's odd, isn't it? I've read studies on how children misbehave when they know, without a doubt, that they'll get slapped, or spanked, or even beaten. But they crave any kind of attention they can get. And the more Robbie acted up, the more attention he got from Amanda, right?"

"Yeah. And Rachel was such a quiet little thing that it was easy to just let her go off in a corner and play by herself. Robbie was the one that had to be watched like a hawk."

"We saw that all the time in the classroom. Children demanding, and getting center stage."

"I can't believe it's taken me this long to see what was happening."

Turning from the railing, Robert drifted over to an empty deck chair and slumped onto it, lying back to stare up at the stars. Suzanne perched on the chair next to him.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. It happens a lot more than you'd think."

"Did Angie come between you and your husband?"

"Oh, she tried. And believe me, sometimes she succeeded."

Easing back, Suzanne reclined on her chair.



"But Phil and I both insisted on good behavior. We weren't tyrants, but we kept Angie within general boundaries." She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe we just got lucky that she had a more easy-going personality, like Rachel."

"Why only one child?"

"I had a lot of trouble with Angie, both the pregnancy and her birth. Then there were two miscarriages. We talked about going to one of those fancy specialists, to see what was wrong, but our insurance wouldn't pay for it."

"I have a feeling if you'd had ten kids, they'd all be well-adjusted."

"I'm beginning to question how we raised Angie. How could she be falling for that weasel, Mark?"

"He's a good guy."

"Whatever." Her toes tapped together rapidly, like she was agitated but refused to argue any further.

The dinner crowd came up on deck to walk off a few calories, and the drinkers brought their cocktails out so they could enjoy the sea breeze and a smoke.

A young couple, probably newlywed, stood at the rail for a moment before he pulled her toward Suzanne's lounge chair. He flopped down first, and Suzanne jumped away before he tugged the woman down on top of him. There was instant groping and wrangling.

"Exhibitionists," Robert grumbled as he rolled off his chair to stand beside Suzanne. "Why don't they take it to their room?"

"Maybe it's an onboard romance," Suzanne suggested. "They just met, and they aren't ready to take it to the next level."

"Oh, trust me, he's ready to take it up a notch. He's just waiting for her to give the signal."

"You're probably right," Suzanne said with a laugh as they strolled along the deck. "And what is your opinion of 'public display of affection'?"

"It has no place in public."

She laughed again.

"I never saw much affection between my parents," Suzanne said, "even at home. But they were . . . tender with each other. Gentle things they said to each other, small touches."

"Oh, there was no PDA when I was growing up. At times, it seemed like they could barely stand to be in the same room."

"So who were you closer to, your mom or your dad?"

"Definitely my mother," Robert said. "I think that's one of the reasons why I thought the relationship between Robbie and Amanda was normal. I had no use for my dad."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you'll love this," Robert said. "He was too busy with work to pay much attention to me."

"History repeating itself with Robbie?" she asked with a smile.

"Definitely."

Robert strolled nearly the whole length of the ship in silence, noting how the passengers were slowly drifting back to their rooms. Most of the stragglers on deck were still buzzed with alcohol and feeling rowdy.

As he and Suzanne rounded the bow of the ship, he said, "After my mom killed herself, I hated my dad."

"You think he drove her to it?"

"I know he did. She was already obsessed with Audrey Hepburn, but when *My Fair Lady* came out in the movie theater, my mom got a little crazy. She started trying to make hats like Audrey wore in the movie. They were a disaster, all lopsided and gaudy. But what the hell, it was just a hat.

"Then one Sunday morning she put one on like she was going to wear it to church. My dad went ballistic. He dragged her in front of the mirror and pointed out all the flaws: the uneven bow, the goofy bird she'd tried to wire to the hat, the misshapen felt. And once he got going he just couldn't stop.

He criticized her clothes, the way she wore her hair like Audrey, everything."

Robert stopped to let the catch in his throat ease. "He told her to wake up."

"Oh, my," Suzanne sighed.

"Yeah. It was like he took away her dream. And evidently, her reason for living, because a week later she drove into that telephone pole."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The first day at sea, and already Robert was bored. He and Suzanne had wandered through the casino, mocking gamblers who were losing at eight o'clock in the morning. They'd also perused the paintings in a gallery that were going up for auction that afternoon.

Next on the agenda was shopping the boutiques in the massive atrium, and it wasn't even noon yet.

"I never wanted to go on a cruise because I didn't want to take time off from work," Robert said. "But it's much worse than I imagined. There's nothing to do but eat and spend money. And on what?" He tried to flick a dangling price tag. "Over-priced Tommy Bahama? Please."

"We'll be in Georgetown tomorrow," Suzanne said, using a tone of voice Robert suspected she'd used on sulking students. "And this afternoon, there's a travel talk in the grand salon to tell us all the things we can do on shore."

"Are you going to pat my head now and tell me to be patient?"

She winked an eye closed. "I'm thinking about it."

Just as she headed for the shop door, Robert heard a blustery voice bellow, "You ain't gonna get away wit dis!"

The sexy bimbo from yesterday strolled into the shop on the arm of Guido, the boyfriend. Today she wore a tropical print mini skirt and matching halter-top, with high-heel sandals that laced to her knees. The boyfriend sported a skin-tight muscle shirt in turquoise with khaki shorts.

"Sooner or later, somebody's gonna figure out what youse did," the mechanic yelled as he followed them into the store. "You and dis cocksucker are gonna pay!"

Suzanne skittered out of the store and across the atrium to a perfume shop. As she browsed bottles in a bargain bin, she continued glancing across at the apparel shop.

"What an awful man," she whispered. "No wonder she left him."

"I'm guessing wifey and her boyfriend bumped him off."

"Really?"

"Men like him don't let go easily," Robert said. "She probably thought her only escape was to kill him. I just don't know if the boyfriend was involved."

He took another look at the woman from across the atrium.

"By the looks of those legs," he said, "I'm pretty sure Guido would do anything she asked."

"But evidently they got away with it, because here they are."

"Or they're on the run. Maybe they're planning to jump ship in Mexico."

The mechanic let loose with another string of profanities that carried all through the atrium.

"Let's go back up on deck," Robert sighed. "I'd rather walk in circles than listen to this."

According to the schedule, the captain's dinner was that evening.

"Makes sense," Robert said. "The women have had all day to get their hair done or whatever. And they want to be able to squeeze into whatever evening dress they brought for the occasion. God knows by Friday, it'll be too tight."

"Let's go," Suzanne said. "I'd love to see everyone dressed up."

The dinner crowd did look elegant. Men, mostly in tuxedos, escorted ladies in an endless variation of the 'black dress'. Robert enjoyed scrutinizing the crowd for Audrey fashions. He was pleasantly surprised at how many women were sporting his merchandise.

"Hey," he scolded as a stylish woman walked by. "That was in our evening line three years ago."

“So what,” Suzanne said. “I’m sure no one here has seen that dress. I say good for her.”

“You, my dear,” Robert glowered, “Are not the kind of customer Audrey’s caters to.”

“You miserable, cheating slut!”

With a groan, Robert turned to see the bimbo and Guido entering the dining room. She was wearing a trendy strapless number in teal, with elastic shirring down the middle of the front. The gathered look displayed her magnificent 36 double-D bust. The skirt barely covered her ass.

Robert involuntarily sucked in a breath and blew it out with a short huff.

“You find her attractive?” Suzanne said. “I agree with the husband, she looks like a slut. And they look like they’re going to the high school prom. His cumberbund matches her dress.”

“You fucking whore!” the mechanic shouted, standing smack in front of his wife. “You never dressed like that for me!”

She pranced right through him, her chin jutting up, her breasts front and center for everyone in the room to admire.

“That guy is making this cruise even more unbearable,” Robert said.

“How long do you think he’ll keep trying to get through to them?”

“Who knows? The man Maggie and I met in Florida had been trying to haunt his brother for months.”

As the wife and her boyfriend took their seats, the mechanic jumped up onto the table and tried to kick a goblet of water in her direction. Then he rose into the air and tried to slam down on the vase of flowers in the center of the table. When nothing worked, he simply stood with hands clenched and screamed.

“Maybe I’ll try Maggie’s technique,” Robert said.

“Wait a minute,” Suzanne said. “Where are you going?”

Robert waved a confident hand over his shoulder as he crossed the room.

He looked up at the mechanic on the table.

“Excuse me, sir.”

The blustering mechanic stopped in mid-screach, his eyes darting around the room beyond Robert.

“You appear to be quite angry at this woman,” Robert said. “Am I correct that she was responsible for your death?”

The man tilted his head, like he still couldn’t understand what was happening. But his eyes finally focused on Robert’s.

“Fuck off!”

There was no reason for Robert to back away. Even though the man looked like a thug, and probably outweighed Robert by a good fifty pounds, he posed no threat. And Robert had seen how Maggie had diffused Stan’s anger by commiserating with him.

“How long have you been trying to make contact with your wife?” he asked.

Without warning, the husky man leaped at Robert, a primal scream drowning out the din of conversation in the room. Robert actually felt an impact, and then an overwhelming sense of drowning, like he and the mechanic had fallen overboard.

Down, down they went, deeper into a chasm of darkness. All sound stopped. Robert tried to fight, to push himself away, but his arms and legs seemed to be paralyzed.

The sensation of not being able to breathe caused Robert to panic, and he struggled harder. He tried to cry out, his mouth gaping open, but nothing happened. Frantically, his eyes skittered back and forth, searching for familiarity, but all he saw was swirling darkness, like smoke.

A feeling of light-headedness swept over Robert, and he thought he was going to pass out. Or worse. There was a moment when he might have actually lost consciousness,

because even the black shroud he was under disappeared. Illogically, he considered that he might be dead.

And then a laugh burst from him. Of course he was dead!

The ridiculousness of the situation eased the tension across his chest. Looking up, he thought he saw a glimmer of light, like the sun shining down through deep, deep water.

He kicked with both feet, like a mermaid, and seemed to move a bit closer to the surface. Concentrating on his arms, he managed to wriggle one free. He pushed against a force that reminded him of holding his hand out the window of a moving car and shoving the wind back.

His other arm broke free, and with hard, steady strokes, he pulled away from the tendrils holding him to the bottom. He moved faster toward the light and away from the murky depths.

An instant of panic gripped him when he thought he might not make it in time, that feeling of running out of air, but he shook off the irrational fear and lunged for the surface.

When he broke through, he gasped.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God!" Suzanne screamed.

She was on her knees, hunched over Robert. And she was crying. Her shaking hands tried to touch his face.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"I don't know!" she cried. "All of a sudden you both just disappeared. I thought you were gone!"

Her head jerked as she glanced away from him.

"Get up!" she said, "Get up! We've got to get out of here!"

She looked past him again, and grew even more agitated.

"Get up, Robert! Hurry!"

She even tried to pull him to his feet.

He was too groggy to understand the urgency. "What's wrong?"

"He's going to wake up," she moaned. "GET...UP!"

Rolling to his knees, Robert wobbled to stand. That's when he saw the mechanic on the floor just a few feet away, his



arms splayed.

“Let’s go,” Suzanne urged. “Just start walking.”

Robert took a tentative step and thought he might tumble back to the floor. All he wanted to do was sleep.

“That’s right,” Suzanne coaxed. “A little more, a little more.”

A crazy notion made Robert smile. Had his tangle with the mechanic scared everyone away? There was no one in the room but waitstaff, clearing away dishes.

At the first cabin they came to, Suzanne motioned for Robert to go inside. But he couldn’t clear his mind to concentrate.

“Go!” she cried from behind him. “Go! Go! Go!”

Groaning like an old man, Robert forced his way through the door and into an empty cabin. He immediately collapsed on the bed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Light was streaming through a window when Robert slowly eased open his eyes. Suzanne lay stretched out beside him, her face in the same worried furrows he'd seen when Angie lie unconscious at the hospital.

He offered a weak smile.

"Did I die again?" he asked.

Suzanne blubbered out a nervous giggle.

"I don't know what you did," she said, "but don't you *ever* do it again."

He rolled his eyes around the room.

"Something's different." He sat up. "We've stopped."

"We pulled into port about thirty minutes ago. We're in Georgetown."

"I've been out all this time?"

She nodded. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to wake up."

Slowly, Robert rose to a sitting position.

"That was bizarre."

"Oh, really? Which part? The part where you and that oaf turned into a bag of gas? Or the part where you were gone for more than three hours."

"Three hours?"

"Then when you finally reappeared, he did, too. And you both started twitching. I thought you'd go at it again if I didn't get you out of there."

Robert stood and stretched. Then he looked around the tiny berth, at the small porthole.

"What happened to our stateroom?"

Suzanne's eyes flared. "All I wanted to do was get you out of the hallway. I swear that idiot was right behind us."

"I don't mind telling you that scared me. I was afraid that bonehead and I were both going to tumble into some alternate universe somewhere. I tried to get away, but my

arms and legs were all tied up, like I was in a spider web or something.”

“You were laughing.”

“Yeah, well once I stopped hyperventilating like a little girl, I understood nothing was going to happen. We’re both already dead. I can’t disappear. I tried that back at the center. Suddenly, it all seemed funny.”

“Well, as soon as you’re able, I want to get off this ship. I don’t ever want to see that jerk again.”

The cruise director had explained that Georgetown had no dock, so passengers wanting to go ashore were to meet at the gangplank door at the lower level, and ride a tender to the island.

Robert and Suzanne cautiously made their way to the bottom of the stairs, but encountered a massive huddle of people jammed in the entryway, waiting.

“Are you kidding?” Robert asked, “These people will be here for hours just to get ashore.”

He pushed through to the head of the line and stepped out onto the roof of a bobbing shuttle boat.

Suzanne nervously glanced at the crowd still boarding, afraid the mechanic would show up at any minute. Robert wasn’t eager to hang around either. Gazing at the shoreline, he spotted a grass shack at the end of a dock with a dive flag flapping in the breeze.

“Let’s head over there,” he said.

Concentrating on the flag, Robert willed himself there, and an instant later, he was standing at the counter of the dive shop. Suzanne appeared right next to him.

They hustled toward the throngs of people already scouring the streets of Georgetown for adventures and bargains.

Suzanne was the first to spot a young couple snapping helmets on before mounting motor scooters.

“Let’s go with them,” she said. “We can see what’s on the island.”

She immediately climbed on the back of the man’s scooter. His cut-off jeans rode high on his tanned thighs. His shirtless chest showed the well-defined lines of muscles, probably from hours spent in a gym.

Suzanne wagged her eyebrows at Robert as she pretended to snake her arms around the man, so Robert climbed on behind the blonde-haired blue-eyed girl and planted his palms on her breasts.

“Let’s go!” he called.

As they headed east, the traffic congestion eased, and the shopping district gave way to high-end private homes along the beach. Eventually, the string of million-dollar villas turned to tropical forest. The farther they got from the docks, the more relaxed Robert felt.

One thing was certain. He was not going back on that ship. Suzanne could sail off into the sunset, but he was done with cruising.

At the east end of the island, the young couple parked their scooters and cut through a hotel to the beach beyond. The white sand was dotted with colorful umbrellas and sunbathers. Beyond, an azure blue sea glistened.

“Oh, this is fabulous,” Suzanne said, her body tilting forward as she walked like she was being pulled by a magnet. “And just think, Robert. You won’t burn up with the heat or get sand between your toes.”

She gave him a smirky little smile and kept walking.

Out on the ocean, a loud boat growled as it shot through the water. A rope tethered to the back of the boat rose high in the air to where some fool dangled from a parachute.

Suzanne squealed. “Oh, let’s do that!”

“Be my guest,” he mumbled as he made a beeline for an empty beach chair.

“Oh, come on Robert,” she said. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

"Back on the ship."

"Well, I'm going," she said, like she was daring him to stop her.

"I know you are," he said, waving a hand. "Go."

She turned with a huff and jogged down the beach to the cabana where a few others were signing up to tempt fate.

Robert watched her climb onto the boat. She was the only passenger without the puffy orange life vest. The water churned as the boat zipped away down the beach. A few minutes later, Robert saw a purple and green parasail climb slowly into the air. By the time it was parallel with him, the chute was high in the air, carrying a man with red swim trunks, and Suzanne, perched on his shoulders like one of those women from an old Esther Williams movie.

Robert shook his head.

At the far end of the beach, the boat made a wide turn and came back, slowing so that the parachute gently lowered the man with red trunks into the shallow water.

With a big grin on her face, Suzanne sprinted back to Robert.

"That was fantastic!" she said. "You should see the shoreline from up there, and the beach, the water. It's beautiful."

"I can imagine."

"No you can't. You're nothing but a fuddy-duddy." She parked her fists on her hips. "Do you even know how to have fun?"

"Hey, I climbed the Statue of Liberty with you."

She rolled her eyes. "That's like riding the ferris wheel."

"So, what? Are you going to badger me all day because I won't parasail?"

"Maybe," she said. But he saw a glint of humor in her eyes.

"All right, all right." He slapped his palms on his knees and stood. "But if that rope breaks, and I'm blown far out to

sea, and you never hear from me again, you just remember it was all your idea.”

“Dear God,” she muttered. “I can only imagine what you were like alive.”

The guide on the boat reviewed the instructions for this surfer dude in a flowered bathing suit that hung halfway down his shins. Robert wondered if the guide thought the kid was stoned.

Robert had his own misgivings. The kid just kept saying ‘yeah, man’ and ‘no pro-blem-o’ to whatever the guide said.

But then the kid leaned back, the boat took off, and the next thing Robert knew, they were lifting up into the air.

It was like Suzanne said. The beach was beautiful from up high, and Robert could see the island sprawled out to his right. The problem was that there was no exhilaration, no rapid heartbeat, no surge of adrenaline. Those were the things that made taking chances so thrilling.

Now if he was Surfer Dude, Robert could feel the rush of wind on his face, taste the salt from the air on his lips. Riding on the kid’s back made him feel like a sissy.

He was leaning down, sort of looking through the kid to the water below, when suddenly Robert felt the distinct fluttering of long hair. His heart was hammering in his chest, and he could definitely smell the twang of salt air.

He quickly looked around, but nothing had changed. And yet everything had. Robert definitely heard the kid repeating a mantra. “This is cool. I’m not going to die. This is cool.”

“What the hell?” Robert said.

“Holy Shit!” the kid screamed.

He went berserk, jerking in his harness to look behind him, and nearly letting go of the handlebar. He looked overhead, and down at his feet. His heart was racing so hard it almost hurt.

Then as quickly as Robert felt the wind, it stopped, and he found himself floating in the air behind the parachute, as

though he'd been left behind.

He was still puzzling over the incident when he got back to Suzanne.

She smiled and shook her head.

"How did you manage to fall off?" she asked. "It's not like a gust of wind blew you."

"I didn't fall," he said. "I think I got in him. Like...in his head."

"You did not."

He nodded, still unsure himself.

"I think I did. I could feel his hair blowing. The air was hot. I could smell the ocean."

Suzanne let her head dip to one side. "You were in his head."

"I could feel his heart pounding. He was trying to keep himself calm, but he was a little scared." Robert thought back. "Then I said something and he just freaked out. And the next thing I knew, I was floating in the sky."

Her mouth crooked to the side. "In the sky."

"Yeah. Like he kicked me out."

"I want to see this," she said.

They traipsed back to the cabana.

Suzanne chose a newly-wed couple so she could be right next to Robert in a two-seat harness.

"Unbelievable," Robert said. "They just got married and already they're willing to plunge to their deaths."

Suzanne shot him an evil eye, so he shut up.

Once in the air, Robert concentrated on the husband, and the next thing he knew, he was in the guy's head, with the wind rustling through his hair, and his wrists aching from gripping the handlebar so tightly.

Hubby was not happy.

"Why couldn't we just stay in our room and have sex all afternoon?" he moaned.

"That's what we did yesterday," his wife replied.

Even though Robert said nothing, after a few seconds he found himself floating again. Ahead, he watched Suzanne wrench around in her seat to gape at the phenomenon.

He gave her a little wave.

"I can't believe it," she said for like the hundredth time as she stomped along in the sand.

"Did you try to get in the girl?" he asked.

"How many times are you going to ask me that?" she said.

"I was concentrating all my efforts. I couldn't do it."

"You leaned right into her?"

"I did everything you told me to do."

"Then why can I?"

"Do you think it has something to do with your fight with that mechanic last night?"

"It wasn't a fight."

"Well, whatever it was," she said. "Maybe the fact that you two 'connected' changed something about you. Like some barrier was broken."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't make sense that suddenly you can get in somebody's head either."

Robert stopped at a man perched on a stool at one of the grass hut bars along the beach. In front of the man sat a tall colorful drink with a slice of pineapple wedged on the rim.

"Let me see something," Robert said.

He waited for the man to take a drink, and when he did, Robert slipped inside.

A blend of sweet fruit juices, and the bite of rum, hit the back of his throat. He couldn't help himself. He let out a short growl at the syrupy taste.

The man jumped, dribbling half the tropical drink down his bare chest. And immediately, Robert was ejected.

"Interesting," he said when he reappeared beside Suzanne. He even smacked his lips.

"Could you taste it?" she asked.



“Yes. I don’t know what it was, but I definitely don’t want another.”

As they strolled along the crowded beach, Suzanne encouraged him to experiment. A young couple ran hand-in-hand into the surf.

“Go see what it feels like,” she said.

Robert popped into the young man for a moment before rejoining Suzanne.

“It feels wet,” he reported.

She puckered her upper lip at him.

At a poolside cabana, she insisted he sample some fried shrimp.

“I’m sure it tastes like shrimp,” he said.

“Just try it.”

When the portly gentleman took a bite, Robert joined him. Then he reported back to Suzanne.

“Coconut batter.”

He even endured a painful sunburn, and the discomfort of sand in his drawers, much to Suzanne’s delight.

Later, the sound of the ship’s horn blew faintly in the distance. Beach goers shrugged into cover-ups and hastily shook sand off towels.

“I guess the ship’s leaving,” Robert said. A twinge of regret caught him off guard. “I know I agreed to come with you on this cruise. And I certainly understand if you want to continue on. But I’m not going back—”

“Of course, we’re not,” Suzanne said. “I’m over cruising.”

“Really?” The dread he’d been feeling morphed into a warm fuzzy sensation that was almost embarrassing.

“Besides, this is much better than being on a crowded ship,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

She slowed and perched a fist on her hip. “I don’t understand why you find this kind of relaxation so boring.”

“I’m not bored,” he insisted. Then he blinked at the revelation. “In fact, I can’t think of anything I’d rather be

doing.”

Steel-drums struck up a tune at the next hotel. Workers lit tiki torches, and waitstaff carried out trays mounded with tropical fruits and cheeses. Hotel guests gathered around a poolside bar.

Robert glanced at Suzanne, then back at the cabana.

“Happy hour.”

“Yes. And I’m sure you would rather be sipping a pina colada.”

He snarled at the idea.

“Well, I would,” she said. “It doesn’t seem fair. You had that strange encounter with the mechanic. And now you can taste, and feel, and smell.”

“Supposedly.”

“What if you and I tried that—” she clasped her hands together, “—bonding thing.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No. You didn’t get hurt. And you didn’t hurt him. For all we know, he’s figured out he can get inside his wife’s head now and he’s driving her crazy.”

“That’s an awful thought,” Robert said.

“My point is, what have we got to lose?”

“I don’t like it.”

“You never do.”

She just stood there staring up at him, waiting for him to acquiesce.

“Right here?”

“Well—,” she said, dragging a toe across the sand. “I guess we could wander down the beach to a more secluded spot if you like.”

“You know,” Robert complained as he followed a step behind her. “If anything happens to you, I’m going to be really pissed.”

She turned and smiled over her shoulder.

When she decided they’d gone far enough, she laid down on the sand and patted for him to lie next to her.

He sat instead. "How are we going to do this?"

She shrugged. "I figured you'd just jump me like he did."

"Jump you?"

"Yeah. That's what he did. He leaped off the table and bam! You were gone."

"Then I should be standing," Robert said. "Should I get a chair so I can really pounce?"

Her eyebrow jerked.

"I don't think that'll be necessary. Just...jump me."

"Just jump me, she says."

Robert stood, hesitated, then half-heartedly fell on her. Nothing happened.

"Oh, for pete's sake, Robert. What was that? You've got to put some oomph in it."

He rolled to his knees.

"I just don't feel good about this."

"Okay, look. I'll jump, too."

"Maybe I'm too weak after that encounter last night."

Suzanne sat up and puckered her mouth. "You're too weak to tangle with me, but you weren't too weak to parasail?"

"Okay." Robert rocked on his heels like he was working up some momentum. "At the count of three."

They counted together, and when they hit three Robert lunged forward; and got hit with a million volts of electricity.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

If Robert could look in a mirror, he was sure his hair would all be singed, his face black with soot. The instant he'd made contact with Suzanne, he was thrown through the air and slammed into the beach. There was no doubt that he would be climbing out of a crater in the sand—if and when he was able to move his arms and legs again.

As he lay helplessly gazing up at the stars, he took an assessment. No pain, no fear, just a feeling of paralysis and absolute euphoria; like waking from a wonderful dream. But what was he dreaming about?

Suzanne!

Robert rolled his head to the left, but she was no longer beside him. He scrambled to his feet, amazed that he was not six feet deep. Spinning in a tight circle, he searched for Suzanne. He finally spotted her body way down the beach.

"I knew it," he cursed as he started to run. Then immediately he was at her side. He dropped to his knees, shaking his head. "I never should have agreed."

She didn't look like she was in pain. In fact, she had an incredibly serene smile on her face.

"Suzanne?"

Her eyes fluttered open. She tried to sit up, but she seemed to be paralyzed like he'd been.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Wow," was all she could say.

Once he got her on her feet, they stumbled and weaved along the beach.

"That wasn't at all like what you described," she told him. "I didn't feel like I was drowning. It was more like getting hit by lightning."

"It was a stupid thing to do."

"Why?"

For some reason, Robert was angry. "What if you had disappeared? You know, like crossed over?"

"The mechanic didn't."

"Well, this was different."

She looped an arm through his. "Let's just say all's well that ends well."

"We're never doing anything like that again."

"Aye, aye, sir," she said, snapping her hand in a salute. Then she slowed up as she stared at the hotel ahead. "I don't believe it. How long was I lying on the beach back there?"

Robert followed her gaze to discover the first hint of dawn on the horizon.

"Are you kidding me?" he snapped. "We were out a lot longer than I was with that mechanic. I told you it was dangerous. You're lucky I didn't—"

She shushed him by pressing her fingers close to his mouth. "We're fine, Robert. Stop hounding me—at least until we find out if it worked."

Suzanne started simple. She stood behind a woman in the hotel's café and leaned through just as she took a bite of bacon. A split second later, Suzanne straightened back up, licking her lips.

"I've never tasted anything so delicious in my life," she said.

"You didn't even stick around long enough to swallow," Robert chided her.

"I didn't want to scare her with my groans of ecstasy."

She scampered over to a table where a woman was eating French toast. Once she'd hung around for a couple bites, Suzanne popped back out.

"Yum, real maple syrup." She got a sheepish grin on her face. "I used to drive Phil crazy when we had pancakes. I didn't care how much it cost, I wanted maple syrup. And when I finished, I'd lick my plate clean."

"Oh, that's classy."

She chortled. "That's the same thing Phil said!"

After gorging on smoked salmon with capers, Belgian waffles buried under a mound of roasted pecans, and eggs Benedict slathered in rich Hollandaise sauce, Suzanne called it quits.

"I'm stuffed," she moaned, patting her stomach.

"I can imagine."

"Hey, I never got to eat that way when I was alive. You've got your scotch, I've got whipped cream."

"So, do you want to work off some of that parasailing?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

On the boat ride out, Suzanne overheard some people who had just arrived from Cancun, talking about a zipline in Playa del Carmen.

"We've got to do that!" she told Robert.

What was a zipline? Robert wondered.

\* \* \*

A zipline was when crazy people stepped into a flimsy harness, got latched onto a thin cable, and went zipping across an incredibly deep chasm at a thousand miles an hour. The zipline at Playa del Carmen had fourteen death-defying runs.

At least the man Robert occupied on the first run was just as scared as he was. They both white-knuckled the grip bar and said their prayers. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

The man's heart raced, he panted with anxiety. His eyes squeezed tight as he counted off the seconds until he reached the other side of the ravine.

The realization that he could not quit, that he had committed to thirteen more such runs, had the guy in an even greater panic. When they reached the other side, the

man's legs were trembling. Robert couldn't get back out fast enough.

Suzanne arrived on the next rider. She stood on the platform with her hands on her knees, her head between her legs.

"Wow!" she said when she straightened. "I think I would have had a heart attack if I wasn't already dead."

"I think the guy I was riding with lost bladder control."

She laughed, then stepped to the front of the line, hopped on the next rider, and disappeared.

The rider Robert had occupied was holding back at the end of the line. Had Robert's fear affected him? Had he inadvertently intensified the man's experience?

Feeling a little guilty, Robert slipped back in, and said softly, "Let's do this."

On the next run, Robert kept his eyes open and his mouth shut. The jungle below was breathtaking. And the sense of accomplishment was empowering. The man he was riding with had calmed down considerably, too.

By the time Robert reached the bottom of the runs, he was ready to do it all again.

"Let's go with the instructors this time," he said. "They take more chances."

That evening, they strolled along the streets of Playa del Carmen looking for an interesting restaurant. Purple lights shining on palm trees in the distance drew them to a funky restaurant with rock walls, hieroglyphs of Mayans, and twinkling lights wrapped around tree trunks that appeared to be holding up the ceiling.

People dining on the veranda got the added bonus of squawking parrots.

"You think anyone ever gets bird poop in their guacamole?" Robert asked.

Suzanne wasn't at all shy about wandering among the diners, sticking her nose in their plates to check out the

food.

She popped into a woman dipping a piece of shrimp into some kind of fruit sauce.

“Mmmm!” Suzanne exclaimed when she came back out. “Mango salsa!”

Robert stopped at a guy with a plate of some kind of beef. When he scooped up a big bite, Robert urged him to sop up more sauce before shoveling the bite in his mouth. It was divine.

“Whooo!” Robert blew out a breath. “Spicy. That guy’s going to need some Tagamet.”

Suzanne ogled a dish tied up in a banana leaf and after sampling a bite, declared that it was fish. Another shrimp dish two tables over caught Robert’s attention. He was going for a second bite when he heard Suzanne squeal.

A waiter had delivered a white chocolate pyramid to a table with three ladies, all poised with forks. When they attacked, Robert discovered the confection was filled with a dark chocolate mousse.

Suzanne swooned—and sampled through all three women.

After dinner, they drifted into a salsa bar along the main thoroughfare. At first, Robert and Suzanne held back, just watching. Scantly-clad women with their chests thrust forward and their butts cocked back, tiptoe-danced around men in shirts unbuttoned to the navel, and tight, tight pants.

Then an announcement came on in Spanish, and all the dancers cleared the floor.

A single couple stepped into a spotlight and the music began.

“This must be some kind of dance contest,” Suzanne said.

Robert gave the female contestant high marks for her costume. She wore a skin-tight halter that shimmered white, and a lavender ruffled skirt that just barely covered her tush.



Her silver high heels accentuated tight calves and firm thighs.

The girl's partner tossed her over his shoulders and pulled her between his legs. She fell against his chest with her back and slid down his crotch, then ducked her head between his legs while he held her by the shoulders.

How did the man keep the bulge in his tight pants from swelling?

After the crowd quieted down, two more contestants took their turn.

"Oh, come on, Robert," Suzanne urged. "We've got to try this."

"I don't know—"

But Suzanne was already on the dance floor.

The trick seemed to be remaining absolutely relaxed so that Robert didn't interfere with the male dancer's moves. And what moves he had. He tossed that woman over his shoulder, she did the splits between his legs; she even did this back-bending move where she leaned onto his thigh and slid down to the toe of his shoe. He did a little mamba with her on his foot, then kicked up and she hopped back to her feet.

The couple was panting and glistening with sweat when the song ended. And Robert had never been so aroused. He jumped out quickly before embarrassing the dancer with his lascivious thoughts.

Outside, Robert and Suzanne giggled as they tried to recreate some of the moves they'd just performed. It was hopeless, and they laughed even harder.

The night was winding down, pedestrians on the sidewalks dwindled, but Robert wasn't ready to give up the wonderful evening. The whole day—no the whole trip with Suzanne—had been one exhilarating experience after another. He eagerly anticipated what might be next.

He spotted a fancy hotel that looked like it might still be jumping. But inside, the only bar still open was playing soft

island music. A few couples sat at tables, sipping wine.

"Looks like everyone is winding down," Suzanne said. "One last drink before they call it quits."

"Or move to the next level," Robert said. "Check those two out."

From table level, a man and woman seemed to be having a pleasant chat. But under the table, they both were rubbing their hands on each other's crotch.

"Check please," Robert mimicked.

Sure enough, the man paid their tab while the woman clung to his side. They looked like they were in some kind of erotic three-legged race to the exit.

An older couple at a different table sat holding hands.

"They're too old for all that lusty stuff," Suzanne said. "Now they take it slow, and do lots of cuddling."

"What do you make of those two?" Robert nodded at a distinguished, silver-haired gentleman and a thirty-something babe sitting back in a dark corner. The babe dabbed her eyes with a napkin. The man looked just as forlorn.

"Oh, my," Suzanne said. "Let's see. He's a politician. And he's come down here to tell his girlfriend they can't see each other anymore."

"Good guess," Robert said. "Or he's a businessman down here with his sex-etary and he just realized he left his Viagra at home."

Suzanne threw her head back and laughed.

"I can't believe you're the same old stiff I met at the hospital." She paused and gave her head a little tilt. "You actually are a lot of fun to be with."

"I owe it all to your uninhibited aggression."

"Are you saying I'm pushy?"

"If the shoe fits—"

"Come on," she said, flipping a finger under his chin. "Let's get us a nightcap before everyone's gone."

They picked a couple that had just come in. She was wearing a cute little wrap-dress in vibrant oranges and yellows. He was more subdued in a polo and golf shorts.

A waitress delivered two Kahluas in fancy liqueur glasses, and coffee. Robert would rather a cognac or brandy, but when in the islands—

The man thanked the woman for a wonderful day. She thanked him for a delightful dinner. They scooted their chairs closer to toast, and each took a sip of liqueur. Robert and Suzanne slipped in to partake as well.

“I don’t usually go on these singles excursions,” the man told his date.

And she quickly agreed that she never would have come without her girlfriends.

Then they just kind of stared at each other. And Robert found himself staring beyond the woman, trying to see Suzanne in her eyes.

He felt a flush on his cheeks, and a tingle that began at his heart and radiated out. A pulse of electricity jolted between his legs. When the man leaned in, Robert followed, and the next thing Robert knew his lips were pressing against velvety bliss.

A zinging current ran down his arms and legs, his body heat kicked in. He deepened the kiss and felt a rush of excitement that made his heart lurch.

He moaned, the man startled, and Robert got dumped. So did Suzanne.

“Wow!” Robert said, uneasily scratching at an eyebrow. “That was unexpected.”

“No kidding,” Suzanne agreed while tugging at an earlobe.

The couple however, suffered no such hesitation. They downed their Kahlua, left the coffee and nearly sprinted to the elevators.

“Do you think they’re going to his room?” Robert asked casually.

"It's hard to say. She might come to her senses in the elevator."

He kind of twitched his head in the direction of the lobby. "We could see if they get off on the same floor."

"—If he goes for the goodnight kiss at the door—"

"—or she invites him in." He jerked his head again.

Suzanne nearly knocked him down trying to get to the elevator first.

The kissing began in earnest the moment the elevator door closed, with the woman pushed against the wall. Her arms tangled around the man's neck, his hands slid up her thigh. By the time they reached the man's room, clothes were coming off with abandon.

They tumbled onto the bed in a tight embrace, their lips biting and tugging at each other. His hands fondled, her hands urged.

Robert glanced over at Suzanne. She was mesmerized by the groping.

"I'm—" He couldn't think of how to explain, so he merely pointed to the man and popped inside. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Suzanne joining the woman.

Robert struggled to stay quiet, but when the man climaxed, Robert roared with the release. He was drowned out by the man's own groan, and the woman's robust cry.

He savored the aftershocks for a moment before rolling away from the man. He ended up right next to Suzanne.

"Dear God," she gasped, her chest heaving from the exertion. "Tell me again why your wife didn't like having sex?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The June meeting of the Cryonics members was held at the Omni Royal in Montreal. The moment Suzanne saw Maggie she went rushing like a new bride to her mother. Robert hoped he got high marks as the new groom.

He knew he had an idiotic smile on his face as he strolled across the room, but he couldn't help it. He'd just spent the last five months on a non-stop high with Suzanne.

She was babbling about the psycho mechanic and Maggie showed more than a little skepticism in her gnarled eyebrows.

"It's true," Robert said.

"Oh, how I wish I'd been there," Maggie said.

"You know, that's the first thing I thought when that guy attacked me. I wished it had been you butting into his business."

"Then Robert and I kind of..." Suzanne waggled her head. "...bonded."

"You two bonded," Maggie repeated.

"Yep." Robert thrust his chest out like the proud macho primate he was. "And everything changed."

Now Maggie really doubted their story. But Suzanne insisted it was all true.

"We've drunk ouzo and eaten flaming cheese in Greece," she said.

"We ate enough pastries in Paris to put anyone in a diabetic coma," Robert told Maggie.

"We went skiing in the Alps—"

"Rode the Orient Express for two days with a couple that never once looked out their bedroom window," Suzanne giggled.

"You're having sex?" Maggie screeched. The people standing nearby suddenly went silence.

"Well, so much for discretion," Robert snipped, his eyes bugging at Maggie.

"Are these people aware you're in their head?" she asked.

"Some folks figure it out sooner than others. The first time I tried it," Robert said, "the guy got so disoriented he dumped me out right away."

"I can imagine it's very disconcerting."

Suzanne assured Maggie that they didn't stay long, and they chose different partners often.

"You know, this information could have astounding repercussions," Maggie said. "How many times has someone decided at the last minute to turn right instead of left. Or changed their opinion on a subject they felt strongly about? Was that their own doing, or were they influenced by a second 'occupant'?"

"Good question," Robert said.

"And what about schizophrenics who have been locked up for years, claiming they hear voices, someone telling them what to do. For all we know, they're simply plagued with a squatter, a ghost who has moved in and won't get out."

"We aren't driving anyone crazy," Robert insisted. "If anything, we're enhancing their experiences."

Suzanne agreed. "Some of the people we've hooked up with clearly expressed that they'd had the best sex of their lives. Sort of two orgasms in one."

"Suzanne!" Robert feigned shock. "Not in front of mother!"

A temp named Janice rushed into the executive lounge, nearly bumping into Maggie.

"Have you seen Stuart?" she asked, sounding breathless.

"Last time I saw him, he was talking to Asa over by the bar," Maggie said. She stuck out a hand to keep Janice from stepping away. "Is something wrong?"

"Is there ever," Janice said. "We got a new patient two days ago. The center wasn't even sure they should take him

because he's only twenty, and the rule was no one under twenty-one. But the parents were so distraught, and they paid extra, so we took the kid. But it's a real problem."

Spotting Stuart, Janice hustled over to him. Robert watched as she pulled Stuart aside, jabbering non-stop, and constantly glancing back toward the door.

When Ned Thompson walked through the door, she froze. Standing next to Ned was the twenty-year-old kid. And he didn't look happy.

His hair was an unnatural black and his bangs hung over one eye. He had the prerequisite tattoos that all young people seemed to have, but his earlobes appeared to be oversized. Robert studied them with an eye half-closed. Instead of the usual spikes in the boy's ears, he had big rings the size of quarters jammed in there, stretching the skin way out of proportion.

"Are you kidding me?" the kid screeched as he surveyed the crowd.

Other temps who were unaware of the situation, stopped talking to see what the commotion was about.

"This is like some old farts' convention," the kid yelled at Ned. "Why would I want to hang around with a bunch of rotting geezers?"

Chagrined, Ned tried to pull the kid aside to calm him down. Stuart hustled over, extending his hand to the kid. He refused the offer.

"Jesus Christ," the kid said, "you're even older than him!" He hitched a thumb at Ned.

"You better duck out of sight," Robert told Maggie. "You're bound to put the kid right over the edge."

"Very funny, Robert," she huffed before she tottered over to the kid.

"Holy shit!" the kid yelled when he saw her. "I'm outta here."

He turned and stormed out the door, with Maggie trotting along behind.

\* \* \*

Stuart Greyson stood at a podium that welcomed a publishing company from Nova Scotia.

"Let's all take our seats, please," he said. "I thought I'd wait until we were all gathered to explain the excitement at the executive lounge. It seems the Cryonics Center has reached another milestone. We've gotten our first young recruit, Brian Campbell. As you saw back at the airport, the young man is a bit overwhelmed at the moment, but we hope he'll mellow out with time."

The temps gathered in the banquet room murmured amongst themselves.

"According to Ned," Stuart said. "Brian committed suicide three days ago. His parents were so distraught that they pleaded with the Cryonics Center to take him, even though, theoretically, he is under age. They had been trying to get treatment for their son's depression, but were unable to prevent him from taking his own life.

"Their hope now is that in the future, Brian will receive proper treatment and go on to live a normal, healthy life. And I couldn't agree more. That boy is no different from us dying of cancer, or diabetes, or old age. Technology holds the key to his ailment as much as it does ours."

Maggie slipped into the empty seat Suzanne was saving at their table. She gave Stuart a thumbs-up.

"Ah, good. I see Maggie's got things straightened out," Stuart said. "Is Brian going to join us here?"

She gave her head a small shake, like it was no big deal.

"Okay, well then, let's move along to other business."

He turned the meeting over to Eddie, the space guy, who had information on some submarine that designers wanted to test in the Marianas Trench east of Guam.

Robert leaned around Suzanne. "So, you actually got that punk straightened out?"



“Heck no,” Maggie said. “He’s pissed. At his parents. At us. I doubt we’ll see him again for a while.”

“Then what was with the thumbs-up?”

“Oh, I didn’t want Stuart to feel bad. He loves these meetings.”

Suzanne pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. “Why is Brian angry at his parents? He should be glad they’ve given him a second chance.”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t see it like that,” Maggie said. “He sees it as just another example of them interfering in his life. He wanted to die, and they wouldn’t allow it. That’s pretty radical if you think about it.”

“And he’s taking it out on us,” Robert said.

“You were quite irritated when you found out you were stuck for the next seventy-five years or so with nothing to do,” she reminded him. “Think about how long that must seem to a mere child of twenty.”

Once Madeline Wingate completed her celebrity deathwatch update, Sam trotted up to the podium to give his science report.

His spiel this time was on the development of a molecular matter printer to create the blueprints for a body that nano-robots would build. An eerie ‘wooo’ was provided by someone in the back.

After the meeting, a lot of the temps moved over to the hotel bar and commandeered an empty table at one end of the room. Bernie was regaling friends with his imitation of a constipated pope. Sam had another contingency of temps cornered, expounding on the blood-brain barrier.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you earlier,” Maggie told Robert. “But Robbie was arrested about a month ago. A drug bust at some apartment. He was immediately remanded into custody since he’d skipped out on his bond. He’s in the Fulton County jail now, awaiting his trial.”

“Great,” Robert said. “I suppose Suzanne will make me go see him while we’re visiting Rachel.”

“Have you seen Angie?”

“No, but she’s on the list, too. Suzanne and I want to check out Hawaii, but we figured we’d get all the family stuff out of the way before we go.”

“Are you leaving right after the meeting?”

“Heck, no,” Robert said. “I’m a changed man. I can sit through opera now. I’ve gone the wrong way on a train for five hours and had to turn around and go back. I believe Suzanne has plans to investigate the sewer system of the entire city here.”

Maggie chuckled. “I forgot. You’re getting sex regularly. That always has a profound affect on a man’s tolerance level.”

Robert reared his head back in shock. “That has absolutely nothing to do with it.”

Nevertheless, Robert tagged along with Suzanne and Maggie and a bunch of other temps who took the Grayline tour of Montreal; eight hours of trudging through the Bell Centre where the Canadians played hockey, a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Olympic Stadium with its funky inclined tower. He even took a side trip to the Notre Dame Basilica with Suzanne and Maggie.

His only stipulation was that he and Suzanne would dine alone, and then spend the evening together. Maggie gave him a leering wink, the old bat.

They were just coming back into the hotel when Maggie skidded to a halt.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped. “It’s Joe. My husband.”

She scurried toward an old man who seemed a bit lost and disoriented. He spotted her, but didn’t seem nearly as eager to meet up. His stooped shoulders drooped even lower, and his bandied legs almost refused to hold him.

Realization sank in, and Maggie pressed her fingers to her lips.

"You died," she said softly.

He gave her a sheepish nod, as though he hadn't meant to.

She reached out a hand. "I hope you didn't suffer much."

The shrug he gave her was non-committal.

"I was at the retirement center at Christmas," she said, a quizzical look on her face. "You looked happy. And healthy."

"I was," Joe said.

After quickly introducing Robert and Suzanne, Maggie threw her hands up.

"I can't believe it," she said. "You just missed the meeting. They could have introduced you."

The expression on Joe's face steadily deteriorated as Maggie babbled on about how he would have to wait for the December meeting but by then he'd be old news.

"How did you find us?" she asked.

"The new greeters at the center thought you might still be here." He looked uneasily at Robert and Suzanne. Then lacing his fingers together, Joe concentrated on his hands. "There was an incident. Over Memorial Day."

Maggie's head tilted to the side in confusion.

"Jason and Lucy picked me up," Joe went on. "To spend a week with them in Sebring."

Maggie filled in the blanks for Robert and Suzanne. "Jason is our son. They live on a lake in Sebring, Florida."

"Anyway," Joe went on. "Travis and Heath were both home for the summer."

"Those are our two grandsons," Maggie said.

"It's always so loud, their friends shouting and the music playing." He turned to Robert, the eyelids of his rheumy eyes sagging. "I can't hear the television over all the noise."

Robert nodded.

"I decided to take Jason's pontoon boat out."

"Oh, good," Maggie said. "Did you and Jason take your fishing poles?"

"Jason was at work, Maggie," Joe said. Her eyebrows twittered.

"Who went with you?"

Joe lowered his head and shook it.

"Joe?"

Without looking up, he continued. "It was just going to be a short ride around the lake. Maybe back into Cutter's Cove. I forgot what Jason said about the hydrilla being so overgrown along the shoreline. I guess I got too close."

Joe looked to Robert for support again. "That stuff grows underwater, you know. You can't even see it until it's too late sometimes."

Robert gave him another encouraging nod.

"The darn weeds got all wrapped around the propeller. Killed the motor. I waited, hoping another boater would come by." Joe's voice waned. "But it was Tuesday."

Maggie's anger was building. "And I'll bet you didn't have your cellphone."

"No! I did!" Joe insisted. "I tried to call the house, but the boys didn't answer."

Maggie harrumphed, and Joe went on.

"I found a piece of an old cane pole. Thought if I could get the motor tipped up, I could scrape the weeds off the propeller."

"You tried to raise that motor by yourself?"

"I know." Joe waved away her protest. "That was stupid. I lost my balance and fell in."

"How far were you from the shore?" Robert asked.

Joe threw his hands up in the air. "Not that far! I could have easily waded to the bank." His face contorted into that sorrowful expression again, and he turned to Maggie. "But I was splashing a lot."

"Oh, no." Maggie moaned quietly.

Robert didn't understand what had suddenly upset her.

Joe tried to put his arm around her to comfort her. "He was a big gator, Maggie. Probably a good seven feet."

"Dear God!" Robert blurted out. "You were attacked by an alligator? What an awful way to die."

"It's not as bad as you think," Joe said. "Mostly, you're traumatized by the idea. Knowing what's happening. But the pain isn't that horrendous. It's over pretty quick."

Robert shuddered and looked at Suzanne. She was horrified.

"Who found you?" Maggie asked. "Not the boys!"

"Not who, Maggie. When." Joe's voice cracked as though he might cry. "It got dark. The pontoon drifted quite a ways away from where I fell in. And of course, my body was dragged into the underbrush of a small inlet."

He paused, too choked up to continue.

Closing her eyes, Maggie said softly, "They didn't take you to the Cryonics Center."

Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. Robert felt so bad for the man. Here he was confessing to his wife about a really stupid mistake, and he had to do it in front of strangers.

"There was so much damage by the time they found me," Joe said in a whisper. He shook off his grief before going on. "And Jason was so distraught. He knew my wishes. He wanted to carry them out. But the medical examiner insisted there was nothing left to salvage."

"Oh, poor Jason," Maggie said. "I know this must have been so hard on him."

Joe nodded. "He even flew to St. Louis to meet with the director of the Cryonics Center. I went with him. But the staff there agreed with the medical examiner. There was nothing to preserve."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The flight back to the States was like a wake.

After Maggie found out about Joe, she just collapsed into herself. It was more than a Bela Lugosi where she zoned out. Even when she was walking through the airport, she was lost in some catatonic state.

For all her ability to help others cope with their shattered lives, she seemed unable to deal with her own. Joe was at a distinct disadvantage in comforting her, since he'd royally screwed up. Robert felt just as helpless. Suzanne was the only one who seemed to be able to reach past Maggie's pain.

"I got down in the dumps a couple months ago," she told Maggie. "Thinking about Robert coming back without me. But you know what he reminded me of? That it's going to be a long time before technology figures out how to reanimate him. It could be eighty years."

Suzanne paused to make sure Maggie was listening before she continued. "He told me I had a choice. I could be miserable, and make him miserable, too. Or I could enjoy those eighty years with him and deal with the rest later."

That didn't sound at all like what Robert had said, but Maggie seemed to find comfort in Suzanne's version so he let it go.

Suzanne had a way of listening beyond his words to hear what he really meant to say. He was trying hard to learn to do the same.

The four parted company at JFK. As Suzanne put it, Maggie and Joe needed some healing time. Personally, if Robert had pulled a blunder like that, the last thing he'd want to do is be alone with Amanda.

Joe had no idea where they'd be heading. And Maggie was too distraught to decide.

“Let’s set a meeting place and time,” Suzanne said to Maggie. “How about three months from now. September first, Robert and I will be at the Washington Monument in D.C. If you want to join us, we’ll be there all day.”

Robert wasn’t sure Maggie even heard, but Joe nodded in agreement.

As he and Suzanne boarded a flight to St. Louis, Robert had a vision of Maggie and Joe hanging out in limbo at JFK all summer.

\* \* \*

Since Suzanne had no idea where Mark lived, they went to the brokerage firm where he’d first met Angie.

He had an office, not a cubicle like a lot of the other men who looked to be about Mark’s age. That said a lot about his success with the company.

He was just wrapping up a phone call, and when he finished, he leapt out of his seat and dashed out of his office. Hanging on the far wall was a captain’s bell that Mark dinged three times.

It must have indicated some kind of sale because all the men and women sitting in their cubicles dropped what they were doing to go congratulate him. There was lots of hand shaking and back slapping, but instead of basking in the glory, Mark encouraged the others by saying if he could do it, so could they.

Robert sensed a palpable rage boiling in Suzanne.

“Let’s go wait in the lobby,” he suggested. “And we’ll follow him home.”

Mark’s house was a renovated bungalow in Kirkwood, a suburb of St. Louis. Once he parked his briefcase on a chair in the living room, he headed for the kitchen. Angie was standing at the counter, but the moment she heard his

footsteps, she quickly spun around, grabbing a towel to dry her hands.

A big smile lit up a face that had been bruised and swollen beyond recognition just months ago. She had an unpretentious beauty that some men might find plain. Her hair was pulled back at the nape of her neck; she wore minimal make up, but it did wonders to add color and dimension to her face.

"How was work?" she asked as she turned to the refrigerator, pulled out a bottle of white wine, and poured one glass.

"Great! I landed another big account today."

He took the wine glass she offered, pulled out a bar stool at a small island centered in the kitchen, and sat. The newspaper was strategically placed, still folded, as though Angie had brought it in and left it for Mark.

"Would you be sweet and pick up my dry cleaning tomorrow?" he asked. "I want to wear my worsted wool suit at the meeting Thursday."

"Sure."

He spread out the paper and scanned the front page.

"You know, on second thought, I'll do it. I wanted to get a new shirt and tie anyway."

"I can do that."

"Would you? You're an angel."

"I'll be over by the mall anyway. I have a doctor's appointment at ten."

Mark turned the page of the newspaper and took a sip of wine. "Hey, did you happen to send a thank you note to the Perkinson's?"

"Sure did," Angie said. "Raved about the food, the guests, and their darling children."

Angie carried a steaming pot to the sink and drained some pasta. For the first time, Robert noticed that she still walked with a limp.



"You didn't pour it on too thick, did you?" Mark glanced up from the paper. "I don't want to come across cloying."

"What is she?" Suzanne asked. "His new personal assistant?"

"She's home all day," Robert said. "And it sounds like she's volunteering to run his errands."

"Oh, please. He didn't say one word about her going to the doctor."

"I suppose she goes pretty regularly. She still can't work."

"So that makes her Mark's gofer?"

"I didn't say that."

"And what was that about her pouring it on too thick? He's the king of heavy-handed compliments."

Mark closed the newspaper. "Sometimes it's the small things that can slip you up."

"Oh my God!" Suzanne huffed. "He's coaching her? It's just like my mother and father. Their whole life was about his career."

Robert considered pointing out that her mother hadn't worked, but he knew better than to fan that flame so he kept his mouth shut.

"She planned the parties, did the shopping, cleaned the house. All my dad did was mix the drinks."

Robert offered a harrumph.

"My mother was always trying to groom me to be a good wife, I guess hoping I was going to marry some doctor or lawyer." She shook her head like she was trying to get her hair out of her face. "They were so disappointed when I married Phil, the building contractor. I guess they were afraid all our entertaining would be at the American Legion."

Angie left the pot in the sink and walked over to the counter.

"Everything will be fine," she said, leaning over to kiss Mark.

He blew out a breath. "I sure hope so."

“She’ll never leave him now,” Suzanne moaned. “My last hope was that living with him while she recuperated might open her eyes.”

“Open her eyes to what?” Robert asked. “You still can’t give me one concrete reason why she shouldn’t be with him.”

She gave Robert an imaginary elbow to the ribs before she stormed out of the kitchen. They didn’t even stay through dinner.

“Are you kidding me?” Robert said as he chased down the street after Suzanne. “We flew all the way out here for an hour visit?”

“Yes. And now were going to Atlanta and pop in on *your* daughter. At home. Let’s see how long you stick around there.”

Robert wasn’t holding out much hope that Rachel’s relationship with Min was a temporary fling. But he was not prepared for the eight by ten photo prominently displayed on the end table in the living room. It showed Rachel and Min both in white gowns; not necessarily wedding gowns, but they were beautiful brides none-the-less. At the bottom of the frame was a small gold plate with the date of their ‘exchanging of vows’.

He’d been out of touch with Audrey’s, but Robert would almost bet that Rachel had chosen her satin, straight-line halter dress from their collection. Or she’d made sure her dress became part of the collection.

Although it was still dark outside, Min was in the kitchen brewing a pot of coffee. She was still in her robe and slippers. As she poured water into the machine, she talked on her Bluetooth. It must have been a business client in a different time zone.

“I can get a quote to you by noon,” she said, “but I really think you should consider holding off until you hear from

The Neilson Group. Their decision could affect our whole campaign."

She pried open an English muffin with a fork and dropped both sides into a toaster.

"No problem," she said. "Call me any time you hear something. That's why I'm here."

High-heels clicked on the hardwood floor of the living room, and Rachel appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she asked Min.

Without turning, Min said, "I thought you could use the sleep."

Rachel's shoulders slumped. She walked up behind Min, put her arms around Min's waist, and kissed the back of her neck.

"I didn't mean to get so defensive last night," Rachel said. "Forgive me?"

"Sure." Min swung around in Rachel's embrace and hugged her back.

"Believe it or not," Rachel said, "I've still been thinking about our conversation."

"Is that good or bad?" Min asked.

"I'm trying to keep it good," Rachel said. "Like you said, you work from home. Most of the time you're either on the phone or on your computer."

The toaster popped up. Min appeared quite excited about Rachel's comment. She squelched a grin while she retrieved the muffins and spread a thimble's worth of butter on each half.

Rachel poured two cups of coffee.

"You said you'd carry it," she said as she set the cups on the island in the middle of the kitchen.

"Absolutely," Min said.

"And we're not going to obsess over clothes, or shoes, or —"

Reaching out, Min laid her hand on Rachel's and gave a gentle squeeze.

"I'm sorry you had such a rotten childhood," she said. "But I promise it will be different with us."

"Rotten childhood?" Robert asked. "What is she talking about? My kids were dressed in Atlanta's finest. They went to the Lovett School for Godsakes. Amanda pulled out all the stops for birthday parties, even for Rachel."

Then he remembered passing by Rachel's bedroom door when she was only five or six. Amanda was trying to dress Rachel for school, but Rachel was refusing to cooperate. As quickly as Amanda could get one argyle sock on Rachel's foot, she was pulling the other one off. And all the while, Amanda was pleading in that whiny voice of hers. "But they're so cute. See how they match your sweater?"

Rachel took a sip of coffee. "I guess I was doomed because my mother was a model."

Suzanne asked Robert, "Was Amanda obsessed with clothes?"

"Oh, yeah," Robert admitted. "I remember one morning my driver was waiting at the front door, horrified at the screaming between Amanda and Rachel. Al would drop the kids at school before taking me to work."

"As soon as I came downstairs, Amanda pointed at Rachel's outfit and asked me what I thought."

"Oh, boy," Suzanne muttered.

Robert nodded. "It looked like Rachel had dug one of my old tuxedo shirts out of the closet. The excess shirt had been cinched at her waist with a wide black belt. I thought it looked quite stylish."

"But not Amanda."

"Absolutely not," he crisply replied, "I mean, Rachel had on the rest of the school's uniform: the tartan skirt and blue blazer. It's just that the shirt hung below the jacket."

"I took a wild stab and asked if the skirt was too short. Amanda went ballistic. 'How can you call yourself a fashion couturier and not see how utterly hideous this outfit is?'"

"She said that right in front of Rachel?"

“Yeah. So I said I thought it looked adorable.” Robert wagged his eyebrows at Suzanne. “Then I pushed the driver and we all ran for the car.”

Rachel sighed. “Let’s do it.”

Min scurried around the island and threw her arms around Rachel. “I promise our son or daughter will grow up happy and well-adjusted.”

“A baby!?” Robert screeched. “They’re talking about having a baby?”

“Yes,” Suzanne chuckled. “What did you think they were planning?”

“Are they going to a clinic and page through photos for a donor? Or do you think one of their gay man friends is going to do the honors?”

“Oh, stop it,” Suzanne scolded. “They love each other. You might as well face it.”

“Look, you’re disappointed in how your daughter’s life is turning out,” he said. “Allow me my own disappointments, okay?”

“You’re right,” Suzanne said. Then she stepped close and snuggled up against his chest.

“What did I ever do to make Rachel hate men?” He asked. Then he shoved a hand in Suzanne’s face. “Don’t answer that.”

Smiling up at him, she said, “Maybe this is why we met. To help each other discover the good things about our daughters’ relationships.”

He snorted a little laugh. “Well you drew double duty. ‘Cause now you have to show me something positive about Robbie.”

\* \* \*

According to Donald Briscoe’s agenda, the attorney had an appointment with Robbie Thursday morning at the Fulton County jail. Robert and Suzanne tagged along.

Briscoe looked like he was slumming it in his off-the-rack taupe suit. Maybe it was his 'prison suit' that he wore when he met with clients. The docket on his personal assistant's desk had listed three other defendants he was visiting.

The attorney kept his back ramrod straight as he strolled down the long row of prison phone booths. With more aplomb than Robert would have shown, Briscoe sat on the edge of a chair facing Robbie and quietly set his briefcase on his knees. Obviously, the man did not want to touch any more surfaces than absolutely necessary.

On the other side of the thick glass, Robbie sat in a bright orange jumpsuit, his hair even more tangled than usual, his eyes drawn tight from lack of sleep.

He snatched the phone off the receiver, then had to wait for Briscoe to leisurely pick up his own phone.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked Briscoe.

"Believe it or not, Robbie, I have other clients," Briscoe said. "Clients who didn't drop out of rehab or jump bond."

"I don't care about them. I want you to do what you do, and get me out of here. This place is a shit hole. I don't know who smells worse, the blacks or the Mexicans. And they won't let anyone even smoke in here. I'm going nuts."

"It's not as simple as you think, Robbie. I'm trying to get a judge to agree to send you back to rehab but so far—"

"Stop fucking around with this rehab bullshit. Just get my trial date. Once they find out it was all Morgan's fault, I'll be through with this crap."

"You don't get it, Robbie. Your fingerprints are on that plastic bag, too. If you're tried as an accessory, and the prosecution can prove premeditation—"

Robbie quacked his fingers like a duck. "Blah, blah, blah. I know you're just saying that so you can jack up my costs. And I already told you money is no object."

"There has been an interesting development in your inheritance," Briscoe said. "You've been assuming that your mother's portion of the estate would be divided between

you and your sister. But according to your father's stipulation, your mother's inheritance reverts to his estate: in this case, the Cryonics Center."

Robbie came up out of his chair. "Are you kidding me? That fucking bastard."

"Is that true?" Suzanne asked Robert.

"Well, yeah," he said. "But I didn't think there'd be much left. I figured Amanda would have it all spent by the time she was ninety years old. If not, maybe I'd need it."

Robbie really did kill the golden goose. If Amanda had stayed alive, she surely would have spent some of her money on him. But with her dead, all that money was gone.

Robbie's attorney continued with the good news. "You already forfeited the ninety thousand dollar bond I posted when you failed to appear in court."

"Oh, just shut the fuck up!" Robbie yelled. "And get me out of here."

Briscoe moved the telephone receiver away from his ear.

"Hey!" Robbie said.

The attorney looked like he'd had quite enough of Robbie, but he listened anyway.

"I want you to say something to the mayor or whoever runs this dump."

"That would be the county sheriff," Briscoe said stiffly.

"Yeah. You tell him the guards in this place suck. Some guy walked past me yesterday and wiped shit on the back of my shirt. I know who it was. But when I told the guard he just laughed. I want something done about him."

"That's not a good idea, Robbie," Briscoe said. "You don't want to draw any attention to yourself. Complaining about the guards will just make matters worse."

"Jesus, you're such a pussy," Robbie complained. "Rachel said you were highly recommended, but I didn't think it was for kissing ass—"

Briscoe hung up the phone and stood. Squaring his shoulders, he walked away.

"Dear God," Suzanne said. "Doesn't Robbie understand how serious all this is?"

"No, he doesn't."

"Can Mr. Briscoe drop Robbie as a client?"

"I don't know, but he looks like he's considering it."

A guard roughly slapped a hand on Robbie's shoulder and told him to get up.

Robbie jerked his shoulder to shrug him away.

"Back off asshole," he said. "I just talked to my attorney about you morons. He's going to report your negligence."

"Is he now?" the guard said, a wide smile on his face.

"Yeah, motherfucker," Robbie said. "I've got rights, you know."

\* \* \*

The next day, while Robert and Suzanne waited at the gate for their flight to Hawaii, a news report came on the overhead television. During the night, Robbie had been in a scuffle, allegedly with another inmate. According to standard procedure, he'd been taken from the county jail to Grady Hospital in downtown Atlanta. Someone at the hospital had sneaked some pictures of Robbie on their telephone and released them on the Internet.

One of Robbie's eyes was swollen shut. He also had a fat lip, but it didn't look like his nose had been broken.

"Unbelievable," Robert said, shaking his head. "Wonder what Robbie thinks about his rights now."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Robert and Suzanne did all the touristy things in Hawaii: the helicopter ride over a volcano, island hopping, the luau on the beach, surfing the Pacific. After two weeks, they moved on to Japan. Then Australia.

It was the middle of July when Robert finally brought up all the travel.

"I've never enjoyed leisure time," he told Suzanne. "My mind was always on business; how to make connections, increase sales. It was all about growth. I didn't realize I was missing so much."

"That makes me happy to hear you say that," she said. "I was afraid you weren't enjoying yourself."

So she had noticed. Now the delicate part came where he had to express his feelings without hurting hers. He plunged into his rehearsed speech.

"Do you know what I've enjoyed the most?" he said. "Being with you. No matter where we are, or what we're doing, you're the factor that makes it such a pleasure."

"Oh, Robert. You're so sweet." She held her palm close to his cheek. "But you are tired of traveling, aren't you?"

"A little."

"And I've been dragging you from pillar to post for weeks. Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Because it hasn't bothered me until lately."

"So what shall we do?" she said. "Your choice."

Why did she have to be so understanding? With Amanda, if there had been a disagreement, they waited until the last straw, and then blurted out their dissatisfaction in a heated argument. Or mumbled sarcastic digs at each other under their breath.

And how was he going to explain what was really going on? He decided to just come out with it.

"I miss work."

There, he said it. Now Suzanne could jump all over him for falling back into that same old rut. But she didn't.

"I suppose you do," she said. "I know men have a much harder time with retirement. Although I suppose now that women have worked a whole career, too, they're probably having just as much trouble adjusting."

"It's hard to shut all that off."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Well—" Do or die time. "I thought about going back to Atlanta. Maybe I could hang around Audrey's a couple days a week. Just to be in with all the action. I know I can't do anything, but I just want to see what's happening."

"Would we stay at a hotel?"

"I haven't worked out any details. I wanted to see what you thought first."

She sat quietly, looking out the airplane window at the ocean below. And Robert waited patiently—for a while. Then he had a thought.

"How about I sweeten the deal. We hang around Atlanta until September when we're supposed to meet Maggie and Joe in D.C. We'll see if they're up for doing something with us. I'd just like to be back at Audrey's by the first of November so I can watch the company's numbers through the Christmas shopping season."

More thinking. More waiting.

"Okay," she finally said. "Here are my requests. I want a house. Someplace nice with a porch or a deck where I can sit outside. And in town, so I can ride the bus."

"You got it." Robert said enthusiastically. He never dreamed it would be this simple.

"Hang on now," she said. "That was my first request. You might not like the next stipulation as much. And you have to promise to stick by the agreement, or the deal is off."

Was she going to say no travel? Would she limit the number of days he could work?

“You can not,” she said shaking her finger, “under any circumstances, get into anyone’s head at work. Not Rachel, not her personal assistant, not even the custodian. You are absolutely not allowed to interfere in how she is running that company.”

\* \* \*

Finding a house wasn’t nearly as simple as they thought it would be. Robert decided Buckhead would be the ideal location for Suzanne: Phipps Plaza and Lenox Square nearby, theaters, restaurants, the bus on Peachtree Street. They poured over listings at a prestigious real estate office on Pharr Road, and then took off to find the perfect abode.

The first house they visited, a lovely Mediterranean ranch, brought reality crashing home. It was completely devoid of furniture. The next house had a few accent pieces for staging, but certainly didn’t feel like a home.

“Okay, so a vacant house won’t work,” Robert said as he and Suzanne rode the bus along Piedmont Road. “But we can’t just move into an occupied house, can we?”

She bared her teeth in a grimace. “Sounds creepy, like haunting someone.”

“Maybe we can find a single who travels a lot. A pilot, or a salesman.”

Suzanne’s cheek crunched. “That will probably be an apartment.”

“Not necessarily,” Robert argued.

“Oh!” She grabbed his arm. “Let’s get off!”

She was gone in a flash, running right through the traffic. On the opposite side of the street, Suzanne stood in front of a banner announcing the grand opening of a new subdivision.

“Ta-da!”

Robert read the sign. “Chelsea Crossing. Luxury homes in Buckhead.” Then he craned his head up to examine the

floating, red balloons tethered to the banner.

“Not up there,” Suzanne said. “Here.”

She pointed to an oval in the corner of the banner with the words: Model Open.

“Ah.” He went for the bluff: eyebrows up, smile, nod. But he didn’t get it.

“Come on,” she said, leading him past the security gate and into the first house on the right.

At the front door, she paused. “Okay, let’s try this again. Ta-da!”

Then she stepped into a gorgeous model home. The builder had spared no expense in furnishing the house to give it maximum appeal. Robert admired a collage of mirrors hanging on a wall in the foyer that made the area appear larger, and the muted gray paint that really made the white trim pop.

Suzanne hustled into the kitchen. Her moan sounded suspiciously like the woman she had commandeered the night before at the Ritz.

“Ohhh, Robert. Isn’t this fabulous?”

The kitchen was decked out with the latest state-of-the-art appliances: stainless steel doors on the sub-zero frig, a professional six-burner stove, even a wine refrigerator under the counter. A bowl of fruit on the island looked fresh. The decorator had even tastefully laid a towel over a cutting board at just the right angle.

Across the counter was the family room, complete with a panel TV over the fireplace. All the side tables had tasteful vases and floral arrangements, the walls were adorned with pictures and artwork.

“Too bad I can’t operate the remote,” Robert said as he wandered around the room.

The master bedroom drew another orgasmic response from Suzanne.

“Look at that bed!” She fell back onto the brocade quilt, writhing sensually across the rich fabric. Robert wondered if

the agent on duty ever invited her boyfriend over after hours. He'd love a little wrangle with Suzanne on that bed.

Before he could take it all in, Suzanne was off to the master bathroom.

"Come and look at this tub!" she called.

Stepping up next to her, Robert rested his chin on her shoulder. "Looks like we found us a home."

For all of its beauty, though, the house had some drawbacks—like the strangers who came parading through at all hours. One day, two women went from room to room, furiously jotting down notes and sneaking pictures with their phones, obviously getting free decorating ideas. Another time, a wife crammed a small, framed picture into her oversized purse, while her husband watched. Mostly, it was couples, dreaming of what they wished they could afford before settling on the reality of less.

And of course, Robert couldn't watch the news or the stock reports, Suzanne could not play music, or cook, or draw a bath in the fabulous tub.

They had no friends to visit. Maggie and Joe did not show up in Washington on September first, much to Suzanne's dismay. And Robert had not paid attention to what the other temps had lined up for the fall when they attended the June meeting.

Sure, they could drop in on their neighbors, and eavesdrop on their conversations. But how pathetic was that?

\* \* \*

The early morning rain blew sideways forcing pedestrians to charge the onslaught with umbrellas thrust forward.

Lounging back in a wrought-iron chair, Robert stretched his feet out from beneath the overhang of the coffee shop. A curtain of water flowed off the building and through his legs.

He and Suzanne were the only brave souls sitting at the sidewalk tables.

"Remember the smell of rain?" she asked, her hands folded casually in her lap.

"No," he said. "I was the one rushing to work."

As though to illustrate Robert's statement, a bus stopped and when the door opened, a man launched himself off the bottom step and across the sidewalk. He briefly shook rain off his umbrella before dashing inside for a cup of the latest latte.

"You were the one standing in the rain with your head tipped up, bathing in its glory," he chided.

"Someone has to appreciate life," she said.

"So, what's on your agenda for today?"

Lightning crackled, and Suzanne waited for the rumble of thunder to stop.

"I'm going to meet the Lenox Square walkers at eight. One of the women, Lucy, had a doctor's appointment yesterday. They're all concerned about a mole on her back."

"You don't want to be late for that mini drama."

"Just because you don't eavesdrop on the gossip at the gym, doesn't mean I can't get to know these women."

"Men don't gossip," Robert pointed out. "They talk about sports."

Suzanne groaned. "I'll take moles any day."

"Why don't you meet me at Audrey's tonight? We can catch a show, or a movie."

"Sounds like a plan."

She stood, blew him a kiss, then stepped out into the driving rain.

Robert zipped to his favorite fitness center at the corner of Piedmont and Peachtree. Scanning the bank of televisions suspended from the ceiling, he found the one playing CNN and positioned himself in front of it. The sound was muted. The people on treadmills in front of the TV's all wore headphones. But usually the closed-captioning was turned

on so Robert could catch up on what was happening in the world.

The anchor of the morning program stated that Robbie's trial had begun. A two-second sound bite showed spectators jostling one another to get a seat in the courtroom. Then there was a quick shot of Robbie and his attorney, Donald Briscoe sitting at the defendant's table. It was the first time Robert had ever seen his son in a suit, at least as an adult. Had Briscoe picked it out? Or had Rachel?

Three quick pics of Amanda, Robert, and Morgan, were flashed in a box beside the anchor's head as she retold the gruesome story once again. The program even showed Robbie with his face bloodied and bruised from the beating at the jail.

So Robbie's trial was big enough news to attract national attention. The courthouse and surrounding area would be a zoo. And yet, the next morning, that's exactly where Robert was: standing in the hallway in front of the courtroom watching people push and shove to get a coveted seat for the trial. The crowd of spectators leaned heavily to women. Probably Audrey's groupies.

There was no fanfare like on TV, where the attorney and client climb out of a car and are mobbed by the press. Robbie and Donald Briscoe merely stepped into the courtroom by a side door and took their seats.

Robbie looked like the clean-cut American success story. Hair cut, tailored suit, even a power tie, like he was a businessman who had to take time out from his busy schedule to get this misunderstanding settled.

First Robbie's attorney tried to get the case dismissed for numerous reasons. And the prosecutor objected. They met at the judge's bench to discuss.

Robert tuned out the argument and scanned the courtroom, playing the game he and Suzanne sometimes did of guessing who the spectators were and what they did for a living.

The heavy woman in the sweat suit had probably dropped her kids off at school and rushed right over to get that front row seat. Or she'd elbowed her way to the front of the queue. The man in the business suit scribbling notes was an attorney, either getting tips on a case of his own, or taking notes for Briscoe's own firm. The elderly couple was easy; they had nothing better to do. Robert counted 67 people, all willing to spend their day watching Robbie's trial.

The prosecutor had barely gotten through his opening statement when Robbie began tugging at his tie. Once loosened, he unbuttoned the stiff top button of his shirt with a grunt, like he might choke to death if he didn't get free.

The judge, a woman with short-cut gray hair, glared at him.

Half an hour later, there was a small commotion at the defense table. Briscoe leaned to his assistant, who left immediately and returned with water for Robbie.

After the lunch break, Robbie returned with his tie cinched up tight again, but it looked like there might have been a struggle because the knot was slightly off-center. Once the trial resumed, Robbie slipped a hand up, yanked on the knot, and completely removed the tie. Robert could see Briscoe's jaw clench as he caught Robbie's sabotage out of the corner of his eye.

By mid-afternoon, Robbie was fidgeting in his chair, wiping his forehead with first one hand, then the other. Robert moved up right next to Robbie for a closer look. He was sweating, drops rolling down the sides of his cheeks and dripping onto the collar of his shirt.

Robbie started to shrug out of his jacket. Briscoe latched onto the front placket, hoping to stop him. But it was like trying to settle a four-year-old during the prayer at church. Robbie would have his way.

The train wreck continued. And the jacket was removed.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

By the time the day's session broke up at four o'clock, Briscoe looked almost as wrung out as Robbie. He seemed to be holding himself rigid, like he might explode before he got out of the courtroom. When he reached out for the handle of the door, Robert noticed a small ring of sweat under his arm. Good God, Robbie had driven a six-figure lawyer to distraction.

Robert went back to Rachel's office to wait for Suzanne. They were going to Veni Vidi Vici for dinner.

The phone on Rachel's desk buzzed, and her personal assistant announced that Donald Briscoe was calling.

Rachel checked her watch then took the call. Robert scooted up close to hear both sides of the conversation.

"That was a complete disaster," Briscoe said.

"How bad?"

"I'm beginning to think I should go with a plea of incompetent to stand trial. For a while there, I was afraid Robbie was going to strip down to his undershorts."

"I guess our gamble backfired."

"No," Briscoe said. "Putting him in isolation was the right thing to do. I had to get him healed up for trial. He would have picked another fight first chance he got. I couldn't have jurors staring at his beat-up face and thinking he got what he deserved for killing his mother."

"But now he's off the pain killers."

"And going through withdrawal big time. The judge called me to the bench and I told her I thought he might be suffering from food poisoning. I asked for a postponement, but she wasn't buying it. We've got to be back tomorrow morning."

"What can I do?"

"I'd ask you to call him, but I'm not sure even you could get through to him. I can't. One thing is certain. He's going

to need another suit. He sweated right through this one.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Rachel said, and hung up.

She called her personal assistant into her office.

“Brenda, I need another suit from Muse’s sent to the courthouse, and Robbie’s suit needs to be picked up and taken to the cleaners.”

“Same style okay?” Brenda asked.

Rachel nodded then called to her before she reached the door. “You better send over a couple extra shirts, too. Make sure they’re all cotton.”

\* \* \*

The minute Robert and Suzanne got to the restaurant, he headed upstairs to the bar. He needed a double.

The place was packed for happy hour, and he had no trouble finding a scotch drinker. He did feel a bit guilty though, when he slipped into a businessman drinking alone, and encouraged him to take a big long gulp.

Sheepishly, Robert sidled back over to Suzanne once he popped back out. She was perched on a bar stool next to a woman sipping white wine.

He plopped down next to Suzanne. She tilted her head down and to the side as she glanced over at him.

“Rough day?” she asked.

“Kind of.”

“I thought you weren’t going to let the business get to you?”

“I’m not.”

Still staring, she squinted her eyes at him. “Well, something’s going on. You haven’t said two words to me since we left the office.”

“I guess I’m just preoccupied.”

Her head straightened, and she looked across to the row of bottles on a shelf before she turned back to Robert, her eyes flaring. “You didn’t.”

“What?”

“You’ve been inside someone’s head. Who was it? Rachel?” Her head quivered with anger. “I told you if you ever tried to interfere—”

Robert held up a hand to stop her. “Robbie’s trial started today. I was at the courthouse, not Audrey’s.”

Instantly, she deflated. “Oh, Robert. How did it go?”

“All I can say is, I’m glad I’m dead, because I certainly wouldn’t want to face the press after his performance today.”

“That bad?”

“You have no idea.”

Robert held up a finger, slipped down three seats, and got another shot of scotch. Then he came back to the seat beside Suzanne and continued.

“His attorney called Rachel after he left the courthouse. I swear the man has never worked this hard for a fee in his life.” Robert shook his head. “I found out something interesting, too. Remember the first time Robbie got beat up and sent to the hospital? They put him on painkillers. But when he got back to the jail, he was on his own again. So he picked a fight with some guy that put him *back* in the hospital. Briscoe finally insisted Robbie be secluded from the general population at the jail, just so he’d heal up for his trial.”

“Dear God, he’s willing to take a beating for drugs?”

“I guess so. Now he’s going through withdrawal, and he can barely sit still at the trial.”

“I suppose the news media is having a ball with that.”

“I don’t even want to watch the news,” Robert said, staring off into the distance. “Poor Rachel, going through this alone.”

Suzanne placed a hand on his shoulder. “She’s not alone. And neither are you.”

Later, back at their model home, Robert lounged on their fabulous bed, his arms tucked behind his head. Suzanne

curled up next to him.

"Are you going back to the courthouse tomorrow?" she asked.

"I guess. I feel like it's my duty, like I'm paying penance for Robbie's screwed up life."

"I'll go with you."

"You don't have to."

"I know."

She snuggled up closer, with her arm hugged across his chest, and her leg draped over his thighs. Never in his life had he experienced such intimacy. Sex was not an option. He couldn't even feel her body wrapped around his. But he felt the emotion. They were a team now, partners. No problem was too great that they couldn't face it together. And everything in his life was made better because she was a part of it.

A twinge of pain needled Robert as he recalled Amanda and Martin together in bed that morning, all wrapped up in each other; her not caring that her hair was a mess. He'd understood immediately that they were in love. And he was bitter that he'd been cheated of that experience.

Drawing his hands out from under his head, he draped Suzanne in an embrace. He closed his eyes and let his mouth relax into a lazy smile.

"I love you," he said softly.

She wriggled against him, trying in vain to get closer. "I love you, too."

"Even if we're together for a hundred years," he said, "It won't be enough."

She lay quietly at his side for so long that he thought she must have zoned out. But then a small whimper broke the silence.

"Aw, honey. I didn't mean to make you cry." He sat up, cursing himself for being such a turkey. "I'm sorry."

"No," she wailed. "That was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me. It's just that I don't know what

I'll do when you're gone." She buried her face in the crook of his arm. "I know I won't be able to watch you meet someone and fall in love again."

"Aw, sweetie," he chuckled. "I thought we went all over this. We've got a whole lifetime ahead of us."

He tickled his fingers under her chin.

"And what makes you think I'll ever find another woman like you? Every time some babe tries to get close, I'll remember all the wonderful times you and I have had. She won't stand a chance."

But instead of cheering her up, he seemed to have made things worse. She whimpered again.

"That's the thing," she cried feebly. "I've been wondering about our memories. Your memories. You know how you told me that your brain is like a hard drive. When they thaw you out, they'll just restart your computer and you'll be you."

"Yeah. We think that's what will happen."

"But what about all the things that are happening now? Aren't all these memories kind of like unsaved data? When you come back, will all of this information get saved onto your hard drive? Or is it all going to be lost?"

\* \* \*

At Robbie's trial the next morning, Robert tried to concentrate on the proceedings. But his mind kept drifting back to Suzanne's questions about his memory once he was revived. He tried to imagine in his mind how at the moment that he was brought back, his new memories would somehow meld with the memories already in his brain. A niggling fear kept harping at him—what if none of this did get saved?

All the other temps assumed they would remember. But what kind of guarantee did they have? The more he thought about it, the more stressed he got. He decided that he would discuss it with Sam the first chance he got at the December

meeting. But that plan didn't offer much solace. How was Sam to know what the future held?

Forlorn, Robert turned his attention back to the witness on the stand. A middle-aged woman with graying hair sat pensively considering the prosecutor's last question.

Briscoe had told Rachel he wasn't worried about the woman. He knew the prosecution had gotten the records for Robbie's flight to Atlanta. This woman had sat next to Morgan during the trip.

"I know they were talking about diamonds," the woman told the district attorney. "And there was something about emeralds. I definitely remember the girl saying that her favorite color was green. Then the man next to her said something about rubies and the girl said red was her favorite color."

The woman shook her head, like a mother listening to a child's silly joke.

At the defense table, Robbie was oblivious to the woman's testimony. His appearance had deteriorated. He hadn't even attempted to wear a tie; his shirt was unbuttoned at the neck. He sat bobbing his head and tapping a pencil on the table like he was drumming to a song. Briscoe nonchalantly slid a hand over and took the pencil away.

Once the prosecutor was finished, Briscoe asked the woman if what she had overheard could have been from a movie or a TV show. Possibly even a book.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose they could have been discussing a movie."

Briscoe was already turning back to the defense table when the woman twisted her mouth and scrunched her eyebrows.

"But why did he say he didn't know the combination to the safe?" she asked.

It was like a stab in his back. Briscoe's face turned to stone, a slight flush rose on his cheeks.

"No further questions," he snapped.

Robert wasn't sure if that last statement had an affect on Robbie, but for some reason, he was suddenly plagued with an itch. He yanked his shirt out of his pants and stuck a hand up under to scratch his belly. Briscoe looked like he might have a stroke.

The policeman who had first arrived at the scene described Robbie as distraught, nervous, and definitely under the influence of drugs. They ran a blood test as soon as they got Robbie and Morgan to the police station.

Again Briscoe had foreseen this, and even knew the damaging results of that blood test. He didn't cross-examine.

As he'd told Rachel, he wasn't really building a defense. How could he? Robbie was caught red-handed with a duffle bag full of jewelry. His prints were on the plastic bag still wrapped around the gun.

And he definitely would not be calling Robbie to the witness stand. He was letting the prosecutor lay out his case, and hoping that he could not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Robbie intended to kill his mother.

The next morning, Robbie looked even worse. He had dark circles under his eyes like he hadn't slept. A casual observer might have surmised that the gravity of the situation was finally sinking in. But Robert knew better. The only thing on Robbie's mind was drugs.

At one point during the morning's proceedings, Robbie's head suddenly nodded forward, like he had dozed off.

The next witness was the John who Morgan had performed sexual favors on in downtown Atlanta.

"She asked me if I had a gun," the man stated. "I got the impression that if I'd said no, she would not have gotten in the car with me."

"So what happened next?"

The man related how Morgan had asked him to drive her to some place secluded. He took her to a small park where

she'd coaxed him out of his car. Then she got down on her knees, asked him to point the gun at her head, and then she —

Hesitating, the man looked down at his hands. The prosecutor finished for him. "She performed a sex act, is that correct?"

The man nodded.

Then, while he was still in the throes of ecstasy, she grabbed the gun and ran. Somewhere along the way, she must have dumped someone's newspaper out of its plastic delivery bag and used it to preserve the man's fingerprints.

Briscoe's summation was pretty good. He threw all the blame on Morgan, who hadn't even gone to trial yet. She had talked about the jewelry, she had stolen the gun, and she had pulled the trigger, killing Amanda Malone.

In fact, Robbie's behavior for the past several days played right into Briscoe's plan. As he paraded in front of the jury, Briscoe said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Does this look like a man who could mastermind a cold-blooded murder?"

He threw his arm out toward the defense table, where Robbie had slouched down in his chair with his elbows planted on the armrests. His head had fallen back on his shoulders. He was fast asleep, with his mouth gaping open.

\* \* \*

The jury deliberated for three days. During that time, Briscoe was in contact with Rachel, assuring her that the longer they were out, the more likely Robbie would be acquitted or at least found guilty of the lesser count of involuntary manslaughter.

When the bailiff reported that the jury had come to a decision, Robert and Suzanne were sitting in the front row of the courtroom.



Technically, Robbie had his suit on, but he wore no tie, and his jacket hung open, revealing the right half of his shirttail hanging out. Robert wondered if he even knew where he was. He slumped into his chair and immediately closed his eyes.

But Robbie's inattentiveness abruptly ended when the bailiff declared him guilty of premeditated murder in the first degree.

He shot up out of that chair like he'd been set on fire.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he screamed at the judge. "I want a new lawyer. This asshole hasn't done a goddamn thing for me! I told him a thousand times I didn't do it, but he wouldn't even—"

As Robbie ranted, the judge banged her gavel, calling loudly for the bailiff to have Robbie removed from the courtroom.

He was still calling a Briscoe a son-of-a-bitch as he was dragged away.

A sentencing hearing was scheduled for a week later. This time, when Robbie came into the courtroom, his suit was straight, the jacket buttoned, the tie so tight Robert thought it might cut off the circulation to Robbie's brain.

But the judge wasn't buying the act. In fact, the first thing she did was reprimand both Robbie and Briscoe for their spurious and superficial attempt at attrition.

"Mr. Malone," she then said, "All during your trial, I never saw the first hint at remorse over the senseless killing of your own mother. You showed no respect for my courtroom, or for your counsel. It is my understanding that you would not even participate in a rehabilitation program in one of our state's premiere facilities."

Robert tuned out most of the mumbo-jumbo about penal codes for the State of Georgia. But he heard the judge's sentence loud and clear. Robbie was sentenced to life in prison, without parole.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*20 years later - June*

Robert and Suzanne had arranged to meet Maggie and Joe at the Prince Albert Memorial across the street from the Royal Albert Hall. Already the crowd of temps was swarming on the sidewalk in front of the huge round auditorium.

"Let's go around to the back and see if the lines are any shorter," Robert suggested.

As they strolled around Kensington Gore, Maggie asked, "Have you got a new address yet?"

"Actually, we do."

Robert gave Suzanne a quick glance before asking Maggie, "Do you remember Dan and Melinda, the couple we hung out with on our Baltic cruise?"

"Your sex partners from Ohio?" Maggie asked.

"Geez, Maggie," Robert complained. "We didn't just hang out with them for the sex."

"That's right," Suzanne agreed. "We also used them to fulfill our food and beverage needs." She smiled at Robert.

"Anyway," Robert said, "We followed them back to Dayton, to check them out on their home turf."

Maggie's eyebrows went haywire. "And did they pass inspection?"

"It's uncanny how Melinda and I think alike," Suzanne said. "We're like sisters."

"And Dan is just like me," Robert said. "Brilliant, handsome, a great conversationalist, and a savvy businessman. I mean, we both went on a cruise of the Baltic Sea with a shipload of senior citizens, and he's only thirty eight. How freaky is that?"

"So you're living with them?" Maggie asked.

"Yes, but don't worry. We haven't taken over their minds. It's just nice to be in a house with music I like playing, or the

television on. Suzanne likes to drop in while Melinda's soaking in a hot tub, occasionally."

Robert decided he didn't need to elaborate on how wonderful the sex was, too. Dan and Melinda were definitely bit old-fashioned. They made love in the dark, with lots of cuddling and kissing, and very little verbal banter. Those preferences made it much easier for Robert to imagine he was making love to Suzanne.

Years ago, Maggie had attempted to overcome the barrier of occupying someone else's mind. She even tried a couple times to start a fight with another ghost, but no one was interested in duking it out with a ninety year-old woman. Joe finally convinced her to give it up.

"Are you commuting to Audrey's?" Joe asked.

"I pop into the office a couple times a week, but believe it or not, I'm losing interest. Dan owns several lawn and garden centers. I've been learning how to landscape."

"I don't believe it," Maggie said. "Let me check those fingernails for dirt."

They all laughed.

The crowd didn't seem much thinner at the back side of the hall. And it appeared as though most of the temps were just standing around chatting with friends rather than moving inside.

"How are the kids?" Maggie asked.

"We're going to see Angie right after the meeting," Suzanne said. "Then down to Atlanta to see Rachel and her brood. Are you still coming to the extravaganza?"

"We wouldn't miss it," Maggie said. "This Saturday, right?"

Joe leaned toward Robert. "Anything new on Robbie?"

"No, he's still running with the big dogs," Robert said. "Rachel heard he even celebrated twenty years in prison by throwing a party for some of his friends. Drugs. Booze. I wouldn't be surprised if the warden made an appearance, the way Robbie throws his money around. I guess he was

greasing the wheels with the guards, too. Telling them to buy a little something extra for the kids."

Maggie clicked her tongue. "What a shame."

"Yeah, Rachel's over it," Robert said. "After his attorney told her about the party, he invited her to accompany him when he visits Robbie next week. I'm not sure what it's all about, because Briscoe never goes to see Robbie any more. There's no need to since they've exhausted any appeals."

"I told Robert maybe he should go, too," Suzanne said.

The crowd took a sudden shift and temps began to disappear through the doors and walls.

"Guess it's time," Maggie said.

Inside, Robert made a mooing sound as all the temps milled through the lobby, trying to decide where to enter the arena.

"I still think Stuart should assign seats, or at least sections," he said. "If we have to meet in huge halls like this now, at least we should be able to sit together."

"How is Stuart supposed to know who you want to sit with," Maggie asked.

Suzanne had her own opinion. "I think you should just meet in smaller groups now. I mean, really. Five thousand people? How are we going to be able to hear the speakers?"

Bernie, the BMW dealer from Jersey flowed by in a crush of temps.

"Bernie!" Robert called out. "Where are you sitting?"

"Madeline's trying to get one of those boxes. I'm just tagging along."

Maggie nudged Robert. "Here comes Jess. I understand he's taking his twelfth group on an Everest expedition. You can still get in on that."

"Yeah, right," Robert scoffed.

"Look!" Suzanne hissed. "It's Brian Campbell and his crew."

Glancing off to his left, Robert spotted the young man who'd committed suicide all those years ago. He had a

following of nearly one hundred other young people, all looking bored, sullen, and angst-ridden.

"Dear God, they look just like those Goth kids did back when I was alive," Maggie said.

Inside the arena, the center floor was empty except for a lone ping-pong table. A tournament was scheduled for the next day. All the seats on the floor were taken with temps.

"We need to move up." Robert pointed to the loggia above.

"Let's get a box," Suzanne suggested.

But after wandering around the hall for several minutes, they realized all the boxes were taken.

"You know," Robert said as they made their way to the cheap seats, "I'm seeing a lot more women temps now."

"Sam says that every year the possibility of cryonics becomes more real, and more people jump on the bandwagon," Maggie said. "I can't imagine what our meetings will be like in another twenty years."

Robert spotted Bernie standing off to the side, looking befuddled.

"What's up Bernie?" he asked.

The man seemed relieved to see a familiar face. "That goofball Madeline. She must have told a hundred people she was getting a box. The place is packed."

"Come sit with us," Robert said.

"I guess you heard the Cryonics Center is about to get bought up by Crycor," Bernie said as he ambled along beside Robert. "Cryonics is big business now. It's no longer a handful of eccentrics and nutjobs gambling on extended life."

Yeah," Robert said. "People are dying to get in now."

There were groans all around.

"This could be our last small meeting," Bernie said.

"Relatively speaking," Maggie said as she turned to take in the large hall.

Here's something interesting," Bernie said. "If we merge, that will reconfigure all of our numbers. I won't be number fifty-nine anymore. I might be number one hundred fifty-nine. We'll all have to wait a bit longer to be revived."

"Fine with me," Robert said.

Seated in front of Robert were two women who looked to be in their mid-eighties.

"It's not right," said one of the women. "The price has nearly doubled again since Nick was preserved three years ago. And this new cryoprotectant they're using is cheaper because more companies are manufacturing the stuff."

The other woman nodded in agreement. "I could only afford the minimal service. Storage only. I didn't even get to select a different hair or eye color for that price. And now that they're packing more brains into each container, I'm sure they're saving money on maintenance."

"I heard they have a temp who wants to come back as the opposite sex," the first woman whispered to her friend.

Stuart Greyson walked out to the center of the arena and climbed up onto the ping-pong table. He welcomed everyone to the meeting.

"What a thrill it is to see so many of our temps attending. Are you all enjoying London?" he asked.

The crowd murmured their approval of the city selected.

"Our growth has been astounding," Stuart told the group that nearly filled the hall. "This year alone, we have processed six hundred and twelve patients. Nearly two a day! I remember when we hit one thousand, what a grand celebration we had in Miami. And now we've nearly reached five thousand. We won't be able to use Albert Hall anymore."

More titters of appreciation swept through the auditorium.

"We'll be breaking into smaller groups today as usual," Stuart told them. "We'll change every half-hour so you can

go to all the meetings and get caught up. Travel information will be shared in the Café Consort on the grand tier level.”

“Not interested,” Maggie said.

“Current events and interests,” Stuart said, “will be handled in the Elgar Room on the circle level.”

“I don’t care who’s dying,” Robert murmured.

“Science and technology updates will be in the East Arena Foyer,” Stuart called out.

Maggie stood. “Let’s just sit in on Sam’s presentation and go. He’s doing something special for the end of the decade report.”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “Then we can go get some haggis and blood pudding.”

“Haggis is in Scotland, Robert.”

The East Arena Foyer was packed with temps. Everyone wanted to know what was happening, and how soon they’d be coming back.

Sam stood on top of the bar that ran along the wall. He told a couple corny jokes before launching into his spiel.

“We have seen amazing progress in the past ten years. The continued popularity of cremation has helped tremendously in getting the new law passed that people must specify that they DO NOT want to donate their organs. Otherwise, all organs are now cryonically-preserved in organ banks. And naturally, we are seeing a lot fewer deaths due to organ failure. Tissue banks, eye banks, are in nearly every hospital. Surgeons are having much better success with liver transplants.”

Sam ambled down the bar like he was on a runway. “Spray dermal armor will soon be approved for over-the-counter use. We all know how wonderfully it protects the skin from harmful UV rays, plus it reduces cuts and scrapes.

“And like Stuart said, we’ve all watched the steady increase in cryonics patients. As technology continues to advance, we see more people opting for the cryonics option

over death. There are now 12 cryonics companies in America, compared to only two when I was preserved. That doesn't include all of the facilities in foreign countries.

"Our gamble has truly become a reality."

\* \* \*

Mark and Angie's new home was one of those McMansions built on half an acre, in a subdivision of similar homes.

Standing in front of a three-way mirror in the bedroom, Mark tightened his tie. "What's the latest with the awning people?"

Angie sat at a secretary tastefully positioned in the bay window of their master suite. A calendar glowed red on the desk. When Angie touched a day, the information in that box enlarged.

"They'll be here at ten o'clock Friday," she said. "And yes, they plan to have sensors at fifteen, thirty, and forty-five feet beyond to keep any and all insects away."

"Good."

Mark slipped his suit jacket off a hanger. The pole holding the empty hangar retracted through a small sliding hatch into their closet.

"How are you coming with my corrections to the guest list?"

Angie scanned the illuminated data, touched a different box, and a seating chart appeared on the desk.

"I moved Gordon Appleby to table seven, and brought Seth Temples over to table eleven with Carla Brooks."

Suzanne was incensed, as usual. "Why can't she see that he's treating her like hired help? I'll bet she doesn't even get a goodbye kiss when he leaves."

"Maybe she doesn't want one." Robert slipped an arm around Suzanne's waist to take the sting out of his admonition. "We go over this every time we visit, sweetheart. I agree, Mark is a first-class jerk. And I was



totally wrong about him being a good guy. But Angie seems to be happy.”

Down the hallway, Robert and Suzanne peeked in on Abby. Her room reminded Robert of Rachel’s when she was a teenager: posters on the wall of the latest heart-throb, clothes strewn across the floor. And Abby lay sound asleep in bed, her arms hugged around her pillow.

In Jarod’s room, he was already awake and on his computer. On one side of a split screen, he was playing a game. On the other side, some kid was chattering in German, and the computer was translating. Evidently, the boys were playing each other.

Once Mark left for work, Suzanne trailed Angie around the house. If her daughter wasn’t picking up after her children, she was coordinating arrangements for Mark’s soiree. By noon, Robert and Suzanne were on their way to Atlanta.

\* \* \*

Every year Rachel and Min held a charity event at the Atlanta Zoo, where they invited underprivileged kids from all over the city to spend a day. They even arranged for the city’s public transit system to provide free rides to kids when accompanied by an adult. The event had become a great public relations promotion for the city.

Robert and Suzanne waited at the entrance to the zoo for Maggie and Joe. Excited kids flooded through the gates. Some looked suspiciously well-dressed, as did their mothers, but no one questioned if they were legitimately poor.

“Wow!” Maggie called as she and Joe stepped off the bus. “What a turn out.”

Suzanne nodded. “I hope they don’t have to turn anyone away.”

“Things will die down after the free lunch,” Robert said.

Both women gave him evil looks, but he got a nod of agreement from Joe when they weren’t looking.

“Where is everyone?” Maggie asked.

“Hunter is at the reptile house making the little girls scream. Christa is in charge of the face-painting near the panda exhibit. Kwamee wanted to be in charge of the raffle this year, so he and Min are handing out tickets right now. They start drawing numbers at ten.”

Robert thought back to Rachel and Min’s decision to adopt. Hunter was only two at the time. His daughter read about some uprising in Uganda, and saw all the orphaned children. Min was pregnant with Christa at the time, but it didn’t matter. They had to do something to help. Not only did they adopt Kwamee, they held charity events to encourage other Atlantans to join the cause. The project just sort of mushroomed across the country. And Audrey’s market share rose nine points.

“I suppose Rachel’s handling the food again?”

“Yeah. She’s got Raj and Neeta with her. They’re too young to do much more than hand out cartons of milk or juice to the kids who come through the line.”

The twins were now ten years old. They’d come a long way from the day they arrived in Atlanta at the age of five. Robert remembered how they’d barely spoken any language, either Pakistani or English. They were under-nourished, neglected, and infested with lice. Rachel and Min couldn’t keep their hands off the two.

Robert and the others meandered through the zoo to the party pavilion, where picnic tables were mounded with giveaways: backpacks, school supplies, hats and mittens for the coming winter, and supermarket gift cards.

“They make it look like you’re a big winner when they call out your number,” Robert said, “but everyone wins something, even if it’s just a ten-dollar grocery card. Rachel and Min have coerced nearly every business in the city to participate in one way or another: caterers, department stores, the media.

"It's great publicity for the city. The mayor declared Atlanta "The City that Cares" on the news last night."

Suzanne told Maggie in a stage-whisper, "Don't let Robert fool you. He doesn't give two shakes about the city. But Audrey's stock continues to grow steadily."

"Hey! I'm proud of Rachel, too. She's a lot more hands-on than Amanda and I ever were. We hosted plenty of charity events back in the day, but other than shaking hands and schmoozing, I didn't pay much attention to where the money went like Rachel and Min do."

"Rachel has become quite the philanthropist," Maggie said.

"Who would have guessed?" Robert said. "I have a daughter who's on the cover of every magazine from People to Fortune 500. And a son rotting in prison."

"Are you going to see him?" Maggie asked.

"Yeah. I want to go see what this big meeting with his attorney is all about."

"And on the twenty-first, we're all off to Argentina," Suzanne squealed. "I can't wait."

"Fair warning," Maggie said. "We may need to extend the trip a few weeks. Joe wants to tour Chile as well."

"Why not?" Robert said. "We've got nothing else to do."

"And you're going to need this break after seeing Robbie."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Donald Briscoe pulled out his telephone and projected a presentation on the cinderblock wall of the prison's meeting room. For at least fifteen minutes, he gave Robbie a detailed account of how his money had been spent.

"As of today," Briscoe said, "You're bank balance is \$523." He even tapped the figure at the bottom of a column of numbers.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Robbie asked.

The years of drug abuse were catching up with Robert's son. His sallow cheeks had deep furrows, the skin on his wiry body looked like leather.

"No, I'm not," Briscoe said, his voice matching Robbie's in intensity. "All those frivolous appeals that I told you were pointless. The boob job for some guard's girlfriend." He slapped his hand on the wall to highlight that expenditure. "Then he quit three months later!"

"That guy was an asshole," Robbie mumbled, as if somehow it wasn't his fault.

Briscoe coughed out a belly laugh. "Remember when you wanted to buy the warden a car? That was hilarious. I almost thought he was going to take it, too."

Sucking a deep breath, Briscoe stretched his neck out of the collar of his shirt and regained his composure.

"Well, it's all gone now. I wanted your sister to see your face when I told you the news but she wouldn't come. Can you believe that? After all these years of you ignoring the greeting cards, and pictures of her children that she sent?"

Briscoe paused to let the implication sink in. Then he snapped his fingers. "Remember the time she and her son Hunter baked you cookies for your birthday and I hand-delivered them? You didn't even open the box. Not once did you give her a call to wish her a Merry Christmas, or to congratulate her and Min on a new addition to the family."

“Who cares?”

“I’m sure she does. You might not want to try mooching off her for a while.”

“Whatever.”

“By the way,” Briscoe reached into his inside pocket, “I’m retiring at the end of the year. My wife and I have a condo in Puerto Vallarta.” He pulled out a picture and handed it to Robbie. “We’re going to take our new boat, hang out in the Caribbean for a few weeks then head on over through the canal. It’s a beauty, isn’t it? I figure you helped pay for it.”

Robbie tore the picture to shreds. “I’m going to sue your ass for embezzlement.”

“The term is misappropriation of funds, Robbie. But as your new attorney will see—if you can find someone to take your case—I’ve kept meticulous records of every dollar I earned representing you.”

Briscoe stood and smoothed the front of his suit jacket. “This day has been a long time coming. How old are you now, Robbie? Forty-six? They used to have this corny saying, years ago. ‘Today is the first day of the rest of your life’.” He leaned forward just a fraction. “Good luck.”

Robbie was still spewing obscenities when the guard came over to the table to escort him back to his cell.

“Can you believe that son-of-a-bitch?” Robbie said to the guard. “He stole my fucking money. I need you to find me a lawyer. He’s not going to get away with this.”

“Your money’s gone?”

“Every motherfucking dime.”

Since they weren’t leaving for Argentina until the twenty-first, Robert went back to the prison alone the next day. A perverted need, he decided, to see Robbie get his comeuppance. Robert wandered through the cellblock until he came to Robbie’s.

“Are you kidding?” Robert huffed.

The walls of Robbie's cell were painted a muted blue. Pictures hung on the walls. His cot was covered with a satin quilt of blue and green swirls, and a striped pillow in matching colors. A small shelf over the foot of the cot held a television, and on a small desk, Robert saw a computer and music dock. A silk-covered shoji screen stood at the combined toilet/sink for privacy. Even the toilet paper looked like it was store bought.

A guard appeared at Robbie's door. "What you want?"

Robbie handed him a bundle of laundry to go to the cleaners.

"How you gonna pay for this?" the guard asked. "Jim says you're out of money."

"Don't you worry about how I'm going to pay. You just take the shirts."

Robert was disappointed that nothing had changed yet. But he had plenty of time before he left for Argentina. And he really wanted to see Robbie's fall from grace before he boarded that plane.

Instead of spending his days at Audrey's, Robert hung out at the prison each day.

Robbie was playing cards with other inmates when the guard came into his cell with the laundry bundle.

"The woman at the cleaners said she didn't get paid for the laundry. I had to pay for this myself. You owe me for that plus my fee to deliver and pickup."

Robbie didn't even look up from the cards in his hand. "Yeah, yeah. You'll get it. I got an attorney coming in this afternoon. He'll get this all straightened out."

"He better." The guard threw the laundry bundle on the bed and walked out.

As Robbie stood in line for lunch, he stopped a man walking by. The man had jagged scars on his face; his eyes were slightly squinted, as though he dared anyone to cross him.

“Hey, asshole,” Robbie said, his hand gripping the man’s arm. “Where’s my stuff? You said I’d have it by noon today.”

“Cash flow problems,” the man said. Robert noticed that the man’s front teeth were rotted black.

Robbie snorted. “How can you have cash flow problems, Del?”

“I don’t,” Del said. “You do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, from now on you’re a cash-only customer. And I need it up-front.”

“You’re full of shit.”

Del cocked up one eyebrow, like he couldn’t believe Robbie was willing to tangle with him.

That afternoon, when the guard escorted Robbie to his meeting with the new attorney, he took him to a long narrow room of glass booths and monitors.

“What the hell is this?” Robbie asked.

“The private meeting rooms are out of your price range,” the guard said in a dull monotone.

Robbie called him a cocksucker.

And when some young law-school intern told Robbie that the attorney had decided against taking his case, Robbie jumped out of his chair.

“I wasted my last five hundred dollars for you to tell me this shit?”

He slammed both palms against the glass barrier and the intern flinched.

He couldn’t have been gone twenty minutes, but by the time Robbie got back to his cell, it had been stripped bare. The TV, the pictures, the quilt, the shoji, even the toilet paper were gone. His clothes had been thrown on the floor and peed on. Nothing was left but a bare mattress.

At first, Robert thought his son was going to pitch a fit, and stomp from cell to cell, demanding the return of his stuff. But the expression on Robbie’s face was different from anything Robert had ever seen before. It showed panic.

\* \* \*

Three days later, Rachel—and Robert—were admiring proofs on an Audrey's advertising flyer, when she got a call from Briscoe. Robbie had been beaten again.

"He's going to try getting drugs that way again?" she asked.

"I don't think that's what Robbie had in mind," Briscoe told her. "If it is, he underestimated the ferocity of the attack. He's in Grady Hospital's intensive care."

Even though Rachel had refused to meet with Robbie in prison, she dropped everything she was doing to rush over to Grady. Robert didn't understand her change of heart, but he went along anyway.

Neither of them was prepared for the damage. Rachel cried out in shock. Robert held back at the doorway, not wanting to get any closer to the pulverized body that was his son.

A doctor listed Robbie's injuries as Rachel looked on in horror. It had taken six stitches to close up the back of Robbie's head where he'd been hit with a blunt object, his nose had been broken, possibly in the fall from the blow to the head.

She sobbed aloud as the doctor described how, during the attack, Robbie's eye was literally gouged out of the socket. Those weren't the doctor's words, but that was what had happened.

Robert gasped at the barbarism. If an animal had been abused to that extent it would have made front page news.

Some of Robbie's teeth had been knocked out, as evidenced by the bulging lips that seemed to be the only part of Robbie's face that wasn't bandaged. He'd been bitten so severely that doctors had to stitch down a hanging flap of skin. Both of Robbie's hands were in casts, a result of having each of his fingers broken.



The doctors had also done their best to repair a thigh muscle that had been slashed from groin to knee.

“Muscle damage like that can have lasting repercussions,” the doctor said. “We think the person doing the cutting must have known he was inflicting a lifelong injury.”

He paused, as though the violence involved was more than he usually saw, even at Grady. Then he continued.

“I’m afraid your brother got caught in some kind of mob frenzy, and there was no one to stop it. Either he was beaten in some remote location, or the guards at the prison turned a blind eye, because your brother was not discovered until this morning.”

Unbelievable. Robert certainly had his differences with Robbie, but no human being deserved to be treated like that.

The doctor’s voice—or maybe it was Rachel’s moans —roused Robbie. He groaned weakly. A parched tongue, with a nasty gash along the side, lolled out of Robbie’s mouth as he tried to lick his cracked lips.

Rachel flew to his side. “Robbie? Can you hear me? It’s Rachel.”

She touched a small area of his cheek that was not bandaged. His one good eye rolled erratically until it finally focused on her. Tears welled and flowed down his temple and onto the pillow.

“Rach?” he managed to grunt.

She nodded, tears rolling down her own cheeks. “Yeah, buddy. I’m here.”

A mournful wail escaped from deep inside Robbie, like an animal howling one final breath. His body quaked as he cried.

Gently easing down onto the bed, Rachel laid her head beside his on the pillow, and hugged her brother. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “I’ll take care of you.”

“Kill me, Rach,” he sobbed. “Kill me before they do.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*10 years later*

Robert and Suzanne lolled in bed, the morning light streaming in through a window.

"That was fun," Robert said, "but I'm glad it's over."

"Me, too," Suzanne said with a sigh. "What a relief to make that last trip to the airport to drop off Raj last night."

"I can't believe Rachel and Min made the trip three times in two days."

"You'd have made them take a cab," she said, tweaking his chin.

"Hey!" Robert feigned indignity. "I would have hired a driver."

"Oh, right."

Min shuffled by their door, scuffing her slippers along the carpet. No sooner did Robert hear water running in the kitchen for coffee, than Rachel hobbled by, cinching a robe at her waist.

"We better get scooting," Suzanne said as she rolled off the bed. "You don't want to miss Robbie."

"No," Robert guffed. "I wouldn't want to do that."

In the kitchen, Min poured two cups of coffee. She slurped a sip and sighed.

"Why do we always try to do so much over the holidays?" she asked.

"Because we rarely have all our children together anymore, and we wanted to make Christmas special."

"Oh, that's right."

Min's hair was still black as coal, but Rachel had begun coloring the few gray hairs that appeared a few years back. They belonged to the same fitness center, and worked out religiously. Both of them looked fit for women in their fifties. Not that Robert would ever say something like that out loud.

It had been a wonderful Christmas. All five kids had pitched in to make cookie dough from scratch, then rolled it out and cut designs. Once they were baked and decorated, eight-dozen cookies were hand-delivered to eight different shut-ins.

Rachel had bought the hottest new board game, and Christmas Eve they all sat around the massive coffee table in front of the fireplace and played. Over the years, Robert had picked up on the kids' nuances. Being the oldest, Hunter always took on the responsibility of reading the directions. And because Raj and Neeta were twins, and the youngest, they helped each other win. Kwamee was super smart, and yet Robert didn't think he'd ever seen him win a game. Christa cheated. They all knew it, and followed closely to see if they could catch her at it.

"What are you grinning about?" Suzanne asked.

"I was just thinking about the kids and how much fun they are to be around. How much fun this whole family is."

"You sound so surprised."

Robert relaxed into a chair at the kitchen table. "When I first talked to the cryonics people, they insisted I make a video to prove I was of sound mind when I made my decision. One of the things they suggested I talk about was why I wanted to come back.

"I made up some crap about not being able to see my grandchildren grow up."

"Why was that crap?" Suzanne asked.

"Because at the time, all I wanted was a second chance to meet a woman who would really love me, or at least love having sex with me." He chuckled and shook his head. "I wanted to be adored."

Suzanne touched the tip of his nose. "You are."

"I know. And I love you very much for that."

"Who would have thought you'd have to die to get what you wanted?"

"Yeah," he said, his mouth tilting to the side. "And all the stuff I didn't even know I wanted."

A weather report came on the television with news of snow in the Rockies.

"Oh, fresh snow," Min said. "Hunter will be so pleased."

"And I'm sure this new girlfriend will think he made it happen just for her."

Rachel chuckled as she sat at the table and pulled her computer from her bathrobe pocket. "You don't think the kids felt like we were chasing them off, do you?"

"No," Min insisted. "They don't want to spend New Years' Eve with us." She picked up a remote and turned on the television.

Half-joking, Robert said, "You're sure you don't want to ring in the New Year with Angie and Mark?"

"No way," Suzanne replied. "I'll catch up with the grandkids when they get back on campus. That is if Abby even went home. Her animosity toward Mark gets more ferocious every year."

"Too bad Angie doesn't take a few tips from Abby on telling Mark to shove it," Robert said.

"Isn't it?"

Once the weatherman finished his report, the news anchor introduced a reporter with a story on prison reform.

The reporter, a young woman, stood in front of a sign that read: Lawrence Correctional Facility.

"Oh, here it is," Rachel said. "Turn it up."

"The legalization of marijuana," the reporter said, "and the availability of several non-addictive recreational pharmaceuticals, has brought illegal drug trade nearly to a stop. Smart cars have made drunk driving a thing of the past. And educational reform, which targets troubled children at a very early age and intervenes with psychological and sociological support, has truly altered the demographics of our prison system."

“The number of new incarcerations each year continues to drop. Today, we take a look at two different prisoners who are serving life sentences without parole.

“LaDonna Majors, who was convicted for the brutal slaying of her husband after years of abuse, and Robert Malone Junior, convicted of the murder of his mother, even though a subsequent trial found his accomplice guilty of the same murder.”

Robert was surprised that Robbie continued to be big news. But of course, the Audrey’s Corporation was the draw.

After the commercials, the program continued, with the reporter and Robbie seated in a small lounge. Everyone in the kitchen groaned when the camera zoomed in closer to his face. His eye had been stitched closed.

“Why do they have to sensationalize?” Rachel complained.

“You’ve had a rather rocky time in prison,” the reporter said. “You were involved in several beatings that landed you in the hospital. An eye gouged out, your leg permanently maimed.”

“I’m a slow learner,” Robbie joked.

“You were issued an artificial eye while you were in the hospital, but later you refused to wear it. In fact, you asked an inmate to stitch your eye shut?”

“The artificial eye they gave me was hideous,” Robbie said. “It looked so unnatural that it drew as much attention as no eye. Maybe more. One day, a prisoner made a snide remark about it, so I just yanked it out and threw it away.”

Another charismatic grin from Robbie. He was a handsome man, Robert thought, even with the stitched eyelid. His hair was styled, and he looked healthy, rested. He was almost as old as Robert had been when he died, but Robbie didn’t have that paunch from too much scotch and rich food. Broad shoulders filled out a navy polo with a logo. The next time the camera zoomed in, Robert saw that the shirt had been issued by the correctional facility where Robbie was housed.

"You are the son of Robert Malone, the Audrey's Corporation magnate, yet no one associated with Audrey's offered financial assistance for you to receive a transplanted eye."

"Oh, no." Robbie waved a finger at the reporter. "Don't try to put the blame on anyone else here. I was bad, pure and simple. Not a bully, just a spoiled rich kid. And if it wasn't for my sister, I never would have turned my life around."

Lifting his hand, Robbie brushed a finger across the closed eye. "This is a good reminder that I made some very bad choices."

"You say your sister got you on the right track. That would be Rachel Malone, CEO of the Audrey's clothing store chain."

"She sure did," Robbie said. "Ten years ago, I was almost beaten to death. A lot of the inmates had a score to settle with me. I layed in that hospital bed, bawling like a baby. I pleaded with my sister to kill me."

"You were at the end of the line," the reporter offered.

"I sure was."

Robbie gazed off as he recalled those days. "Rachel came to see me every day. She even cried with me those first few days. But then she got tough."

Robert remembered the day Rachel showed up at the hospital like a drill sergeant with a new recruit. The moment Robbie started in on his daily rant on how unfair life was, she raised her hands to cut him off.

"We're done with that, Robbie," she told him. "The bandages are gone, the stitches are out. Now we're going to get you healed inside."

Robbie gave her this vapid stare, like he had no idea what she was talking about.

"I pulled a lot of strings to keep you here," she continued. "But time is running out. They want to send you back to prison next week."

Panic hit Robbie. "No! You can't make me go back there."

"I have no choice. If I thought I could get you another appeal, believe me, I would."

Robbie sat up in bed. "Get me some heroin, or some sleeping pills. Anything I can OD on."

"I can't do that."

"Please!" he screamed. "Don't make me go back. They'll kill me, I swear they will."

"No they won't. I've got lawsuits against the warden, the prison, and the state. The guards who were on duty the night you were attacked have already been dismissed. Trust me, no one is going to look the other way any more."

"You don't understand," Robbie whined, "if somebody wants to get me, they will."

That's when Rachel sat on the edge of Robbie's bed and looked him in the eye. "Then you have to be strong. You have to show those men that you're not afraid."

"Rach..."

She held up her hand to stop him. "Surely you're not the only one who's been picked on, Robbie. It's been this way for as long as there have been prisons. It's the bullies against the rest. You need to team up with those guys and stand against the bullies. If you make friends..."

"How am I supposed to make friends?" Robbie screeched. "I'm broke!"

"Oh, Robbie." Rachel shook her head. "You can't buy friends."

She brushed his shaggy hair away from his forehead then rested a palm on his cheek.

"You have to show you care. That may mean you have to stand up for someone else before he'll stand up for you."

"You mean get beat up again."

"If that's what it takes to show them all that you aren't afraid."

The reporter shook her head as she listened to Robbie's story. "Did the guards protect you when you got back to

prison?"

"Oh, some," Robbie said with a sigh. "But I still got harassed by other inmates. My sister was right though. I saw new guys coming in all the time who were just as strung-out and scared as I was. And I saw the makings of a new generation of bullies, choosing up sides, gathering recruits."

"There is a very complex hierarchy of power in prisons, some based on money, like mine was at one time, others based on fear and intimidation."

"So you teamed up with the underdogs, so to speak."

"Underdogs. That's good," Robbie said with a chuckle. "Yeah, we get together and talk. I've taken a few more knocks to prove that the tough guys can't push me around anymore. Men are notorious for using their fists instead of their words. But some of us are getting better. Slowly but surely, more guys are willing to take a stand against the injustices."

"Doesn't that camaraderie aggravate the bullies?"

"Oh, sure." Robbie rubbed his stomach and grimaced. "And it's hard sometimes to forgive and forget. But that's what you have to do."

Robert tuned out the rest of the interview. Forgive and forget? Robbie sure had done his share of that once he was released from the hospital.

At least once a week, Robert showed up at the prison; not in the hopes of seeing Robbie get punched or kicked, but to see if his son could live up to Rachel's expectations.

One afternoon, Robbie stumbled upon two goons pulverizing a punk named Frankie. Robert had seen him before, usually tagging along like a mutt behind a bully named Del.

Frankie must have really pissed someone off. He was wedged in the corner, his forearms up protecting his face. One of his attackers punched him in the stomach and Frankie dropped his arms. That's when the other tough socked him in the nose. Blood gushed.



"Oh, that's gotta hurt," Robbie said.

"Keep walkin'," one of the guys said.

"I wish I could," Robbie answered, "Cause I got a feeling I'm gonna get my nose busted again, too."

The other thug turned to glare at Robbie.

"What's with you?"

Robbie shrugged. "You're what? Two hundred thirty? Two hundred thirty-five pounds? I see you working out every day. Why does it take two of you to kick the shit out of Frankie here? He's what? A hundred sixty?"

He didn't sound confrontational, just curious. Both brutes turned on him, and Robert was sure he'd get more than a busted nose. But Robbie relaxed his shoulders and turned his hands up in a 'what the hell?' gesture.

"Fuck you, Richie Rich," one of the thugs said, and then they both stomped off.

Blood rolled down Frankie's chin and onto his prison uniform. He took a swipe at it with a sleeve.

"That won't work," Robbie told him. "You gotta pinch your nose until it stops bleeding."

"Fuck you!" Frankie answered.

"I'm telling you, I've had plenty of bloody noses. You gotta pinch it."

"Leave me alone," Frankie yelled. "I see what you're doing. You think if you're nice to me, I'll be your friend. Well fuck you. I'm never gonna be your friend."

"That's fine, man." He even raised his hands, as if warding off further abuse.

"Fucking rich kid," Frankie blurted, then he took another swipe at his nose. He paced back and forth like a caged animal, like he couldn't get past Robbie to run away. His fists opened and closed. He shook his head, like a debate was going on inside. Then he screamed at Robbie.

"I'm the one who sliced open your leg, motherfucker!" Blood flew off his lips in a fine mist.

Robbie stood in stunned silence. His mouth hung open. He blinked slowly as though Frankie's words were just now reaching him. Robert was just as shocked. He watched Frankie ball his fists and raise them, expecting Robbie to pounce on him.

But he didn't.

"Thanks for telling me, man," he said calmly. He started to turn away, but then added. "I'm not bullshit though. You gotta pinch your nose."

Then he just walked away.

"Hey! You wait a minute," Frankie yelled after him. "I know what you're up to. You're gonna make me sweat. Then when I'm not ready for it, you're gonna come after me."

Glancing back, Robbie shook his head. "No. That road leads to pain. I don't need any more of that."

Suzanne reached her hand along the table to Robert's.

"I remember the day you came home from your visit to Robbie and told me that story," she said.

"Yeah. Everything kind of turned around then," Robert said. "It was the first time I was tempted to get inside Robbie's head. To let him know I was there. And to tell him how proud I was of him."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*December meeting, 2070*

A gust of wind blew pellets of sleet ticking across the parking lot. A lone glove was swept up from the pavement and went sailing right through a temp off to Robert's right.

"I never realized how lovely Ann Arbor can be in December," he remarked.

"At least fans don't sit out in this kind of weather like they used to," Maggie said.

Joe turned from the giant stadium across the lot. "I wonder if they ever covered the stadium in Green Bay?" he asked.

A group of temps ahead disappeared through double glass doors of the arena.

"This is stupid," Robert said. "How are we going to hear anything?"

"Stop being such a stuffed shirt," Maggie told him. "Sam says the Michigan Stadium is the largest in the country, and they needed some place big to get all us temps in one place."

"I still don't see why all the different cryonics groups wanted to meet here. Who's going to speak? Stuart Greyson, or someone else?"

"Just be patient, Robert," Maggie said. "It will all make sense soon."

"You already know?"

"Yes, but I've been sworn to secrecy."

"What's all the mystery?"

"Why can't you just appreciate how much work went into getting every cryonics temp, in the world, at this gathering today. Over one hundred thousand souls all in one place, with one commonality."

"Yeah, yeah, all right."

Suzanne tickled her fingers under his chin to cajole him out of his sour mood.

"We're going to be great, great grandparents again soon," she told Maggie.

"Really?"

"Hey, that's my news," Robert said.

"Then tell it."

Jerking his head away when Suzanne zeroed in on another tickle, Robert said, "Hunter's granddaughter Erica and her husband have petitioned for a child."

Maggie clapped her hands. "Oh, how exciting. Are they asking for a boy or a girl?"

"I think they're waiting until they get permission," Robert said. "They don't want to get their hopes up."

"This is their first, isn't it?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, but Brock, her husband is a little worried that his financial dossier isn't strong enough."

"I'm sure everything will work out," Maggie said.

A greeter at the door asked what year they had been preserved, then directed them to a section with the rest of a group with similar dates.

"How's Angie?" Maggie asked.

"She's so happy," Suzanne said. "And she loves London. The conservancy she volunteers for can't believe how organized she is."

"After thirty-five years of managing Mark's life, she should be good," Robert said.

"Is Mark still badgering her?"

"I don't think he knows where she is," Suzanne said. "Last he knew, she was in Paris."

At the top of a flight of stairs, Robert stepped out into the stadium.

"Good God!" he said.

His eyes scanned the huge basin. An ocean of temps filled nearly every seat. He turned to look up at the seats behind

him, also filled. He spotted Bernie and waved. Surrounding Bernie were total strangers.

The agitation Robert had been experiencing eased a bit. If this many people were waiting to come back, surely he had several more years with Suzanne before his number came up for reanimation. Even with all the mergers, he was still only number two-hundred fourteen. That meant thousands of others would be reanimated first.

Five men strolled out to the middle of the football field, and stood on a huge M on the fifty-yard line. Some kind of animal had been spray painted on the turf as well.

The only person Robert recognized was Stuart Greyson. A rather portly gentleman next to Stuart raised his arms to quiet everyone down.

"Welcome everyone," he said, pronouncing each word slowly. "Some of you may know me. My name is Nigel Witherington, I was an actor in the British Theatre for over thirty years."

A smattering of hoots could be heard in various areas of the stadium. Probably all Brits. Robert had never heard of the man.

"I was asked to speak today," he continued slowly, "because I've been told I have a big mouth."

More laughs erupted.

"We were lucky to procure this magnificent stadium. I understand the Badgers are undefeated this year."

A wave of boos and hoots rumbled through the crowd. One of the men on the field turned to whisper something to Witherington. He nodded and raised both arms.

"Sorry. Sorry. I've been told the team mascot is a wolverine, not a badger."

As Witherington spoke, he turned in a circle, so that everyone could hear him. Robert was amazed that the man's voice carried fairly well, even with his back turned.

“This month, December, of the year two thousand seventy, is a momentous date for all of you. On December twelfth, nineteen ninety-five, the first man was cryopreserved in California, here in the United States. Seventy-five years ago, this month, a small group of forward-thinking pioneers carried out the first successful procedure on Mr. James Gallagher.”

Witherington gestured to the man next to him and he stepped forward. Because no one could clap, they cheered. Gallagher took a bow before stepping back with the group.

“Now I know what you are thinking,” Witherington said. “What about Dr. James Bedford, a truly courageous man, who in 1967 volunteered to be frozen by *traditional* means. Dr. Bedford’s body remains in a frozen state at Crycor and we have every hope that he will be successfully reanimated in the very near future. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. James Bedford.”

Again, Witherington turned and gestured to the man standing on his other side. Bedford stepped forward for a bow.

“Poor old geezer,” Maggie muttered. “If he makes it, it’ll be a miracle. That was very gracious of the committee to include him in the celebration.”

Back front and center, Witherington made another announcement.

“Another milestone was achieved in June of this year, but the committee felt it deserved repeating this December. This is now the second meeting of cryonics temps, worldwide, with no...new... members.”

The crowd roared their enthusiasm.

“This is an astounding revelation,” Witherington said. “It means that no one—NO ONE—has involuntarily died, anywhere in the world. Medical advancements have achieved what no one thought was possible one hundred years ago. Immortality.”

The crowd broke into ear-piercing screeches and howls. Robert wondered if their combined energy could be heard outside the stadium.

"No one has died?" Suzanne asked. "I can hardly believe that."

"Oh, people are still dying," Maggie said. "But because they have chosen to die. There's still a strong religious coalition that believes life should not be prolonged beyond a certain point. Although it has become something of a gray area for religious leaders. A Christian can get a heart transplant when he's ninety, but at some point he's got to go meet his maker."

"I wonder what the insurance companies are going to do, now that no one is taking out revival policies."

"And Crycor won't have anymore insurance payoffs coming in," Robert said. "I hope they invested wisely. They've got a lot of work ahead of them." He coughed out a laugh. "That would be funny if the board just took the money and ran."

"Fat chance of that," Maggie said glumly. "I'm afraid our reanimation is coming—soon."

Sam came trotting up to the four of them as they crossed the parking lot. Robert wanted to find the nearest bar and get a drink.

"Hey," Sam said, poking his head between Robert and Maggie. "You're coming to our technology update at Crisler Arena, aren't you? These guys I've been hanging out with are geniuses. We've got a fantastic presentation. The committee gave us the basketball arena because they figured we'd draw the biggest crowds."

"I don't know," Maggie said. "Maybe you can give us a recap later."

"What? You're kidding, right? We're going to be talking about clones that are being grown right now for us. Well, not

for *us* precisely, but for the temps that have only been in storage the last few years."

He was so excited, he actually trembled.

"Look, Sam," Maggie said, her voice soothing and calm. "I understand your enthusiasm. But some of us aren't in a real partying mood right now."

At first Sam stared at Maggie like she'd just grown a second head, but then he noticed Joe and Suzanne standing off to the side.

"Oh, right," he said. "That was rude. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Maggie said. "We're heading back to the Tower Hotel. We'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"Sure thing."

Sam cupped a hand on Robert's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

\* \* \*

The four of them sat at a table in the restaurant next door to the hotel. Robert stared out the window at passers-by.

"Do you suppose there are others like us who aren't looking forward to being reanimated?" he asked.

Maggie snorted. "I'm sure Brian Campbell and the rest of his emo gang is unhappy. Of course, they're unhappy about everything."

"Yeah," Joe said. "Now they'll have to get all their new body parts re-tattooed and re-pierced."

"And get a job," Robert added.

"I can't believe it," Maggie said to Robert. "Seems like just a few years ago, you were lamenting how long you would have to wait, with nothing to do, and nowhere to go."

"Yeah," he said, shaking his head. "I didn't see how I was going to survive without working fifteen-hour days."

"I remember you even considered climbing into your dewar like Albert Jackson did, just hanging out in the liquid nitrogen for all this time."



“Maybe he had the right idea after all,” Robert said. “If we come back without our memories, all of this will be lost. The places we’ve been, the things we’ve done. What about all the classes Sam has taken? All the research Eddie has done about the space programs of other countries?”

Joe rested his head in his hands and shook it. “All those celebrities Madeline Wingate waited patiently to die so she could meet them.”

Everyone at the table burst into laughter, even Robert. And once he started laughing, it just grew, from a slight chuckle, to a laugh, until his whole body convulsed with the absurdity, not just of Madeline, but the whole cryonics experiment. If he were alive, he’d have tears in his eyes, and he’d be gasping for breath. He laughed so hard, his mouth was open, but nothing came out.

Then it ended abruptly with a sob. He looked down at his hands, shocked and embarrassed by his grief. The table grew quiet.

He asked, in a whisper, “What if I don’t remember Suzanne?”

\* \* \*

The spring sun must have felt warm on Dan’s face, because he sat on his haunches and basked in the rays. Then he dropped back down to hands and knees. Robert watched the way Dan gently eased a young tomato plant out of its container and carefully spread apart the roots before he placed it in a hole and tamped down the dirt around it.

Gardening had never held the slightest appeal for Robert. Why grow a tomato when you can buy one? But Dan and Melinda were both organic aficionados. And the first time Robert popped into Dan to taste a fresh-picked tomato, he understood why.

Melinda called out from the screen door. "Your sandwich is ready."

Both Dan and Robert looked up. Suzanne was right beside Melinda.

Brushing the dirt off his knees, Dan crossed the garden, stepping over the rows he'd already planted. He wove through a tangle of patio furniture, still dripping from the garden hose Melinda had used to spray away the winter dust.

Before he stepped into the vacuumed screen porch, he took off his shoes.

"How's it coming?" Melinda asked as he came through the door into the kitchen.

"Tomatoes are almost done," he told her. "I've still got all the peppers to put in."

"I'm just waiting for the furniture to dry, so I can help."

"Where's my sandwich?" Robert teased Suzanne.

She puckered her lips and made smooching sounds.

"Hello. Anybody home?" Maggie tottered into the kitchen. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

"You know you ask that every time you come here," Robert said with a droll expression on his face.

Suzanne and Maggie ignored him as they exchanged air kisses.

"Where's Joe?" Suzanne asked.

"I came alone." She turned to Robert. "Did you see the news this morning?"

He shook his head. "We've been working in the yard."

The wrinkles on Maggie's face deepened. She looked at Suzanne first, then at Robert. "It's started."

A queasy jolt ran through Robert, as though he'd suddenly dropped down the slope of a roller coaster.

"Today?"

"At ten o'clock, California time," Maggie said. "The media is all over it. Crycor was trying to keep it low key for the first couple run-throughs, but somehow the news leaked."

“Let’s go.”

All three of them transported to Crycor’s main facility in California. Formerly, the center had been a huge warehouse full of stainless-steel dewars, with a two-story administrative building, and the surgical, preservation bays in front. But over the last two years, a brand new, three-story reanimation and recovery wing had been added.

Media vehicles from all the networks clogged the street in front of the center. And swarming around the vehicles were temps from all over the country.

“Dear God!” Maggie moaned. “How am I going to find Joe? It wasn’t nearly this crowded earlier.”

“We’re not going to get in to see anything,” Robert said.

“No, we’re not,” Maggie said as she searched frantically for Joe.

“You can’t see anything down here,” Robert said. “Get up on that van.”

Clamoring on top of a news van, Maggie turned in all directions before she finally spotted Joe. Robert watched her wave an arm.

Then she called down to Robert. “He’s holding a spot at the front door. I’m going to go see what’s happening.” She disappeared.

Robert and Suzanne climbed on top of the van to get a better look themselves. Maggie sort of hovered horizontally over Joe rather than invade someone else’s space. She gestured toward the van, and then, seeing Robert, she waved. So did Joe. A few minutes later, Sam poked his head out of the glass front door.

He and Maggie jabbered for several minutes before she drifted slowly back to Robert. That couldn’t be a good sign. If she had encouraging news, she’d have zipped right over.

“Okay,” she said when she alighted on the roof. “Sam says the building is wall-to-wall temps already. There’s no place to stand, and certainly no room in the surgical suite where

the procedure is about to begin. He suggested we find a bar, or hotel lobby where we can watch for news updates. He says one of the educational channels has an exclusive on taping the whole thing.”

“Who did they select for the first procedure?” Suzanne asked.

“They’re going strictly by the book,” Maggie said. “The last preserved patient was a woman named Tanya Kettering. Sam says she’s in the surgical suite now, nervous as a cat.”

“I’ll bet,” Robert said. “Everyone expects the first few to get botched somehow.”

“Yes, well, everyone’s hoping for the best.”

“And she knows about the signal?” Robert asked.

For the past several years, more temps had gotten worried about the transfer of memories once reanimation occurred. At the last temp meeting, a universal phrase had been voted on.

Whoever was reanimated first, they were supposed to say ‘It’s a wolverine, not a badger.’ That phrase had become sort of a standing joke since the day Nigel Witherington had addressed over one hundred thousand temps at the Michigan stadium.

If Tanya didn’t remember to say the phrase—. Robert didn’t want to think about the implications.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The educational channel might have gotten an exclusive on taping the procedure, but they certainly weren't showing it live. For hours, Maggie and Joe, Robert and Suzanne sat in a bar watching doctors and scientists and even people on the street, express their opinions on what was happening. What were the odds of a successful reanimation the first time? How had the process of cryonics evolved? Would this influx of new citizens cause a problem with the employment and housing markets?

Finally, at nine-thirty that night, the program went live at the center. A team of doctors flanked a spokesperson who announced that the procedure was completed, that Tanya Kettering had not yet regained consciousness, but they were quite hopeful that they had achieved what had once been thought impossible.

"The next twenty-four hours are crucial," he said.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "My God, they still use that tired phrase?"

The bar closed at midnight, and the televisions went silent.

"Let's go to the executive lounge at the airport," Maggie suggested. "They've got all those TVs."

The executive lounge at LAX was just as crowded as Crycor. Not only were temps jammed in shoulder-to-shoulder, they were floating in the spaces overhead. And many of the gates had clusters of temps watching the single monitors. Robert and his friends found a deserted gate in terminal eight.

All night long, the news reports were rehashes of the day before. But at eight o'clock the next morning, the news channel went live to the same crew of doctors, looking bleary-eyed and exhausted. They'd probably been up all night, keeping a vigil on Tanya Kettering.

The doctor chosen as spokesperson smiled wearily. "We are very pleased to announce that Tanya Kettering is awake and cognitive of her surroundings."

There was very little reaction from the news crews taping, but Robert knew there were thousands of temps who had to be jumping for joy at that moment.

The news station promised a quick interview with Tanya Kettering at nine o'clock.

Robert paced up and down the corridor of terminal eight for an hour, unable to keep still. Suzanne sat curled up in one of the plastic seat, her hands clutched in her lap.

At nine o'clock, the TV anchor made a quick introduction, and the program went live at Crycor.

There was Tanya Kettering, sitting up in a hospital bed, smiling for the camera. Her head was wrapped in a gauze bandage, but she looked incredible. The wrinkles were gone, the bags under her eyes, the sagging jowls. Her clone looked like a healthy, vibrant twenty-something woman.

"Dear God," Robert murmured. "It's really happening."

The reporter held out a microphone, and asked Tanya how she was feeling.

"Wonderful!" Tanya said. "I was afraid I might be in a lot of pain, but I feel terrific."

"Say it," Maggie mumbled. "Give the signal."

Robert stood right next to her. "It's a wolverine, not a badger."

The reporter asked Tanya, "Does it feel like you've been asleep for two years?"

Tanya giggled. "Not really. I was surprised when they told me how long it had been."

"Come on!" Robert shouted. "It's a wolverine, not a badger!"

"Do you remember having any dreams?" the reporter asked.

"No," Tanya shook her head. "It's like when I had my hip replaced. One minute I was talking to the surgeons, and the

next minute I was waking up and the surgery was over. I don't remember anything else."

Robert felt a giant vise crush him, like a shoe had just obliterated an insignificant bug. A short sob escaped from Suzanne before she clapped a hand to her mouth. He wrapped an arm across her shoulders and they did their best to cling to each other.

"Well, I guess that's it," he said.

"Not necessarily," Maggie said. "Maybe they didn't get all the connections right. You know they have lots of nerves and vessels that have to be matched up between the brain and the stem. Some of her wiring might have gotten crossed."

"Thanks, Maggie," Robert said, but he didn't feel grateful. And he certainly didn't think she was right.

Nevertheless, over the next two days, all four of them remained near a television where they could get updates on Tanya.

The surgeons were so confident, they scheduled the next surgery. According to Sam, once the team of doctors and technicians was up to speed, they would all head to different centers and begin reanimations there.

When the second temp failed to repeat the signal, Robert gave up hope. He and Suzanne flew back to Dayton. He trudged out to Dan's garden, sat on a bench, and zoned out.

He didn't know how long he'd been in his trance, but by the angry expression on Suzanne's face, it must have been a while.

"That's enough, Robert. I'm not going to let you sit out here and mope anymore."

He struggled to keep his voice from wavering. "I don't want to come back."

She sighed and sat down next to him. "I know. I don't want to lose you, either. Especially now that I know you won't remember me. But there's nothing we can do to stop this from happening. And Sam says you're so far down the list that it could still be years before they get to you."

Robert gazed off into the distance. "I'll be the same asshole I was when I died. Alone and miserable, with nothing but my job."

"Come on, now. You'll be a young man again. You'll meet someone—"

"I'll be looking for the same kind of wife I had the first time. I'll make all the same mistakes. I'll resent my kids."

"Maybe not. Even Robbie learned from his mistakes. You might, too."

Folding his arms on his knees, Robert buried his head in his lap. "I don't want to come back."

He made a half-hearted effort to snap out of it, but after a week of sulking, Suzanne had had enough.

"Why don't you go see Rachel? You haven't been to the office in months."

"What's the point? I won't remember anything."

Cocking up an eyebrow, Suzanne gave him a chilly stare. "Just go. And while you're at it, why don't you swing through Virginia and check in on Robbie."

\* \* \*

It was hard to believe that Rachel was eighty-four. She didn't look a day over fifty. Of course, she had the money for skin rejuvenations, eye lifts, jowl reductions. A couple years ago, she had a bad shoulder socket replaced, and now she was still playing tennis.

She sat on the veranda of their country estate north of the city. One of her great grandchildren—Robert couldn't remember her name off-hand—crawled across a bamboo mat, chasing a robotic dog. In the distance, Robert watched a couple play tennis on the private court. Was it his great, great grandson Eric, Christa's boy?

The baby had caught the dog by its tail, and the mechanism that drove the dog whined. Rachel swooped over to rescue the pet before its gears burned up.



“No, no,” she scolded the child gently. “We don’t pull Rover’s tail.”

The way she was going, Rachel would live to be well over a hundred. Robert had never thought about coming back while she and Robbie were still alive. Now it was a real possibility.

He pondered all the changes in the Corporation. Hunter had added a full men’s line during his years at the helm. Christa had expanded the children’s wear to include boys and infants. It would all hit Robert at once.

And what about Rachel and Min? Would he go through all that crap again about being shocked? Would he appreciate their wonderful family, or think his great, great grandchildren were annoying?

Rachel sat back in her chair and sang a song to the child, clapping his hands together to keep the beat.

In the kitchen, Min finished up a big pot of vegetable soup. Crusty breadsticks stood in a crock like a giant bouquet. Eric and his friend each ate a big bowl before leaving. Rachel brought the baby in and strapped her into one of those new-fangled high chairs.

Her name was Emma. Both Rachel and Min praised the child for eating her pureed soup. Then her mother, Teron, Hunter’s oldest daughter, showed up. She ate with Rachel and Min before taking Emma home with her.

As Rachel was cleaning up, one of Kwamee’s boys, Desmond, dropped in, and immediately a bowl was produced, soup reheated, and breadsticks offered.

Robert would be about his age when he was revived. It was obvious that he would be warmly welcomed into the extended family. But would he be critical of their easy-going lifestyle like the old Robert? Dear God, would he be as offensive as Brian Campbell, the emo temp?

Once Rachel and Min went to bed, Robert headed for the airport, stopping in downtown Atlanta to wander around the deserted streets.

The city had changed so much over the years, he doubted if he'd be able to find his way to work. Would he even be working at Audrey's? Surely he didn't think he could walk in and take up where he'd left off. Initially, he'd thought Audrey's would be gone by the time he was reanimated, and he would start over from scratch. But he couldn't do that now. Compete against his own corporation? Never.

He might start out as a buyer, like Rachel had, but fashion had changed so much over the years, and he would not recall all of the subtle nuances of those trends. He'd be plunked back into his mindset at the age of fifty-seven. How embarrassing, to be told by your grandson that you can't cut it.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of corporate headquarters, Robert pressed a palm onto the Audrey's logo, etched in the glass. In a million years, he never would have dreamed that first boutique in Indianapolis would evolve into this. Had Amanda envisioned anything like this when she agreed to marry him?

Robert tried to imagine meeting a woman once he returned. People didn't just chance upon one another and get married anymore. They had to take compatibility tests. And if they wanted children, they had to petition for the right. The infants were incubated in a controlled environment where anomalies were discovered and corrected immediately.

Shaking his head, Robert shuffled toward the transportation station. This alien world he was coming back to might prove to be too daunting. According to Sam, Crycor had a reeducation program prepared that would be downloaded into their brain after they were revived. That fact didn't offer Robert much solace. The center might load him up with the black and white facts of the past sixty years, but who would teach him the grays?

\* \* \*

It had been a few years since Robert had visited his son. He probably could have transported directly there from Atlanta, but he chose to fly up to Richmond instead. He needed time to prepare himself.

The United States no longer maintained prisons. Younger generations of citizens had been genetically perfected so aberrant behavior was a thing of the past. There was no real crime, no lower class of unemployed, or inner city dregs. Unskilled, manual laborers had been replaced with robots.

Years ago, most of the remaining prisoners were rehabilitated and reintroduced into special work camps. But Robbie was one of those deemed 'not cost-effective' for repair, and placed in a communal facility with other elderly prisoners with significant health problems.

Robbie's 'retirement' facility was south of Richmond, Virginia. It looked like one of those old nursing homes from back in the late nineteen-hundreds, only the government had seen no reason to continue the upkeep of the grounds. A few remaining shrubs had managed to survive despite the neglect, but the lawn was hard-packed dirt. Only the hardiest of weeds was able to break through. There were no spring flowers, no hanging pots along the eaves, just a shabby, one-story building across the street from an abandoned strip mall.

There was no guard tower, and no bars at the door. Posted instructions required visitors to place their full hand on a monitoring pad, with fingers spread. A heavy layer of dust and grime covered the hand pad. Robert wondered if anyone had been here since Rachel's last visit.

Inside, an abandoned reception desk sat in the small lobby, a straight-back chair still perched at the side. Robert had never seen anyone at the desk. He'd never seen prison personnel anywhere in the home, just the remaining inmates.

Down a short hallway and to the right was a long ward of single beds. Two rows of twelve ran along each wall, with an aisle in the middle. At each end was a bathroom.

Half of the men were still lolling in bed when he arrived, but Robbie was up. He was eighty-seven now, but he looked older and more decrepit than Maggie or Joe. The cheeks that had been full when he was in his fifties were now sunken. The skin on his arms was withered. Robert marveled that Robbie could even walk, he was so thin.

Yet there he was, encouraging an inmate to get out of bed.

"Come on, Randy," Robbie coaxed. "The final bell is going to ring. You gotta change your clothes today. This one's a mess."

The man rolled away from Robbie, and Robert could see a brown stain on his backside. His bed was stained as well.

Robert turned away in disgust. The room must have smelled like a sewer.

Giving up, Robbie hobbled to the bathroom. Hanging his cane on a hook, Robbie shrugged out of his hospital-type gown. He balled it up and dropped it down a chute. Then he stepped into a shower, and for ten seconds, water cascaded over Robbie. He quickly rubbed himself clean under his arms and between his legs. A blast of air partially dried him off before a clean gown appeared. Robbie slipped into it, and pulled on two side straps that cinched the gown closed in the back. Grabbing his cane, he gimped his way to the living area.

A handful of men had already gathered at a small door in the corner of the community room. Three times a day, at designated times, the small door was raised, and the men were fed. If you could call it food.

More men shuffled slowly over, like cows waiting for a bale of hay to be pitched from a loft. Robbie took his place beside the waist-high door, and when it opened, a tall glass of

beige liquid rotated out. The first man in line took the glass and another rotated into place.

Robert was reminded of when he was a kid. Some company came out with a liquid drink called Instant Breakfast. He'd begged his mother to buy some. He pretended he was an astronaut as he drank it. It had tasted like thick chocolate milk, but according to the commercials it had been chock full of essential vitamins and minerals.

The gunk these men received was considered nutritionally balanced, but Robert had never been tempted to slip inside one of the inmates for a taste. It looked disgusting.

Robbie stood to one side as each man got his meal.

"Careful," he said quietly to a man whose hand shook so hard that some of the liquid slopped out. "Use both hands, Terry."

He encouraged the next man. "You're doing fine, Bret. This isn't a race. You take your time."

"We're playing rummy tonight," another man said. "You in?"

"Sure thing," Robbie replied.

One by one, the men settled into armchairs in a semi-circle before a television where they drank their breakfast and watched the morning news.

Robert thought it was a travesty that the men were not given an option of coffee or tea with their meal. How hard would it be for someone to program a robot to brew coffee, for God's sake. Of course, the government probably would have euthanized the whole lot of them by now if they thought they could get away with it.

Robbie took the last drink and the small door snapped shut. There were no seconds, and if a man dropped his drink, or spilled it, he was out of luck until the next meal.

Settling into an empty chair, Robbie breathed out a sigh. He was winded from the morning's activities. He rested his glass on his leg and watched the news. One of the reports

was an update on Tanya Kettering, the first woman reanimated.

“Hey!” Robbie said, pointing his cane at the television. “My dad’s one of those guys. He got frozen when I was in my twenties.”

A few of the men nodded without taking their eyes off the screen. Robert figured they’d heard about it before. Then Robbie fell silent, mesmerized by the news.

It occurred to Robert that his son had spent almost his entire life watching television. When he was a kid, Amanda parked him in front of the TV to keep him entertained. During his visit to New York, all Robert had seen Robbie do was veg out in front of his television. Even in prison, inmates either had a set, or they watched someone else’s. Robbie had never worked a day in his life, but he was probably a walking encyclopedia of every television show produced in the last eighty-five years.

The morning dragged on, through talk shows, and then game shows. Right after lunch, one of the men heaved himself out of his seat and shuffled toward the waste chute to throw away his lunch glass. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side.

He jerked, and made a hiccupping sound. His left leg buckled and he made an awkward turn to try and catch himself with his right hand. The cup in his hand crunched against a chair back, dribbling the last dregs onto the fabric. The man tumbled sideways to the floor. His head hit the tile with a sharp crack.

Immediately, Robbie was on his feet.

“Frankie!”

Two other men nearby scrabbled out of their chairs. A man across the room called out, “What happened? What’s going on?”

With the help of his cane, Robbie lowered himself down onto his good knee. He pressed two fingers against Frank’s neck.

Others from the group gathered around, their faces pensive and fearful.

Robbie blew out a breath of relief. "He's alive. I guess he tripped."

He made a feeble attempt to make Frank comfortable by straightening out his leg, and pushing his arms against his sides. He brushed a wisp of thin white hair back into place on the side of Frank's head.

"Come on, buddy," Robbie whispered. "Stay with me."

One of the other inmates shuffled over to a small box on the wall, like a fire alarm. He slid open a small window and pressed a red call button that was marked "For Emergency Use ONLY."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Robbie sat in the chair Frank had grabbed to break his fall. He glanced down, still hoping for movement three hours after his friend had fallen. Frank was sprawled in the same position.

Scratching nervously at his forehead, Robbie closed his eyes, like he was trying to come up with a plan. His good leg bobbed spastically. His mouth quivered, the wrinkles around his lips expanding and contracting. Then he opened his eyes and looked out the window on the far side of the room like he was waiting for someone.

The television blared on, but Robert could see that no one in the room was concentrating on yet another game show. From time to time, someone would stand to get a look at Frank on the floor, or he'd call over to Robbie, "Any change?"

By the time two EMTs rolled a stretcher into the room, Robert was sure Frank was dead. One of the techs knelt down and checked his pulse. He shook his head.

"Anybody know what happened here?" he asked.

"He fell," Robbie said. "Bumped his head."

As though to confirm, the tech slipped a hand under Frank's head and felt.

"Yep. He's got a big knot back here."

Robert wondered if they would bother with an autopsy, or just list the cause of death as 'a big knot'.

After they left, Robbie sat hunched in his chair, his arthritic hands fisted together at his face. He chewed at the tip of his thumb as he rocked slowly. His good eye pooled with tears.

When the dinner bell rang, Robbie stayed in his chair. One of the other men brought Robbie's drink to him, but he refused to take it.

And when he lay in his bed that night, his left hand dug into his thigh, massaging the old wound. His head thrashed



from side to side fitfully.

Somewhere in the dark, a man called to Robbie.

"Let it go, man. Nothing you could have done."

"That's right, Robbie. You got to get your head on straight again."

But Robert understood the significance of losing Frankie. He was Robbie's greatest achievement. A friend who had been his worst enemy.

After taking a couple deep breaths, Robbie began his humming chant. It was a relaxation technique he had learned years before.

\* \* \*

The June meeting was in Chicago. Robert stood next to Suzanne in a back corner of the executive lounge at O'Hare International, complaining to Maggie.

"There's no kind of medical attention whatsoever," he said. "All those guys are just left there to die."

Joe shook his head as he listened.

"I gathered that from what I've heard," she said. "They're on some kind of 'do not resuscitate' list, too. I guess the government feels they've been gracious enough to let our remaining prisoners live."

"My god," Robert said, "They're just a bunch of sick old men. They have no human contact with the outside world."

"Sounds like something out of a book I read years ago when writers were trying to warn us about the future," Maggie said.

She started to say more, then nodded for Robert to look behind him. Sam was making his way from group to group.

"I've never seen him so depressed," she said. "This memory business has hit him pretty hard."

"I can imagine," Suzanne said. "He spent so much time in class. He must feel its all been a big waste."

Sam tried to smile when he spotted their little group, but it didn't alter his sorrowful eyes, or his furrowed brow.

"Hi, everybody," he said with a sigh.

"You need to get away from the center," Maggie scolded. "Is this the first you've been outside the building?"

He gave her a sheepish shrug.

"Why don't you come with the four of us?" she said. "We're taking the train across Canada all the way to the Rockies."

"Canada, huh? I haven't done that in a while."

"Yes, Sam. Please come with us," Suzanne encouraged.

"Are you speaking at the meeting today?" Robert asked him.

"No. What's the point?"

"We'd still like to know how the reanimations are coming," Maggie said.

"Then watch the news," Sam grumbled.

"Surely you have something good to report," she said.

As much as Sam wanted to wallow in his grief, that basic need to document and report findings rose to the surface.

"Well, I did go out to the facility where the clones are growing. I looked us all up."

"Really," Maggie said, encouraging Sam to continue. "How did I look?"

"We're still in adolescent stage, but you looked pretty."

He stood quietly for a long time, his head bobbing, like he was getting it all straight in his mind. Then he turned to Robert.

"They pulled your DNA from your body. They've decided it will be easier to grow clones even for the whole body preservations. You were pretty ugly as a kid."

Maggie snorted.

"Hey!" Robert protested. "My mama always told me I had unique features."

Suzanne gave his cheek a little tweak. It was worth taking a ribbing from Sam, just to see the smile on his face.

"So," Robert leaned closer to Sam, "Did you see Madeline Wingate? Is she already a double D?"

"Oh-ho!" Sam hooted. "The techs had to extend the glass."

It felt good to laugh again. They'd all been depressed ever since Tanya Kettering came back with no memory of her time in limbo. Even subsequent patients had no recollection of the temps, so Maggie's theory that something might not have been connected properly was a wash.

And then Robert had spent those days with Robbie, which just added to his depression.

"Here's an interesting tidbit," Sam said. "The news has made such a big deal about us coming back, that the center has gotten a few squatters."

"What?" Robert asked.

"Dead people have been hanging around the reanimation suite, hoping they can jump into a body before the rightful owner does."

"You're kidding!" Maggie chortled. "Has anyone been successful?"

"No. They get booted out immediately. But you've got to admire people for their ingenuity."

Later that night, after the meeting, Robert curled up behind Suzanne on the bed in their hotel room.

"That was pretty crazy, what Sam said about squatters trying to hijack bodies at the center."

"People never cease to amaze me," she said.

"At first, when he told us, I got so excited. I thought all our problems were over."

"Why?"

"Because of Maggie. She doesn't want to come back, either. She wants to stay with Joe."

Suzanne quickly flipped over to face Robert. Her eyes glowed with excitement.

"But it won't work," he said. "So don't get your hopes up."

She moaned and buried her face in his chest. "Because I'd come back as Maggie, not me."

"Yeah. And I don't care how pretty Sam says she looks. I'm not going there."

\* \* \*

Early in their excursion to Canada, Robert and Maggie resolved to make the most of the time they had left. There was no point making Joe and Suzanne miserable. And Sam definitely needed cheering up.

"One thing I am going to do though," he told them all as they sat high up in the glass-domed train, viewing the fields of Saskatchewan growing lush with crops. "I'm going back to Virginia and get to know Robbie."

"You already know all about Robbie," Suzanne said.

"No, I mean get inside his head. I've been watching him for years. But I think it's time I told him I'm proud of what he's doing."

"That's a wonderful idea, Robert," Maggie said. "I'm proud of how you've changed your attitude toward Robbie."

"He's probably not going to live much longer," Robert said. "I want him to see the new me before he dies."

"Just be careful when you pop into his head," Maggie warned. "He might not be too receptive. Don't push it."

"Yeah, especially if he thinks you're the Robert we first met all those years ago," Sam added.

True to his word, as soon as Robert and Suzanne returned from Canada, he went back to the retirement home to see his son.

Before he left, he and Suzanne had discussed the best way to get things started. Robert had even kidded about breathing heavily like Darth Vader when he said, "Robbie, I am your father."

But now that he was standing behind Robbie, he wondered if his son would be glad to see him or not.

He slipped into Robbie's head, and got hit with a jolt of pain that felt like someone had slugged him with a ball bat. His left leg throbbed with stabbing pain that radiated all the way up his chest. And Robbie's back ached because he sat so rigid, tensed against the pain. Even the joints in his fingers seemed to pulse.

Because he could breathe now, Robert inhaled deeply several times to get on top of the intensity.

"You okay, Robbie?" one of the other men asked.

That's when Robert realized he'd been rocking as he breathed and Robbie was, too.

"Yeah," Robbie said, shaking his head against the disorientation. "I just—" Robbie stood, and placing a hand in the small of his back, he straightened slightly.

"Your back hurtin' you again?" the man in the next chair asked.

"No." Robbie bent a little. "It's not hurting much at all."

Robert decided to take a chance. He whispered, "Let's take a walk."

Robbie jerked around like someone had snuck up behind him. "What the fuck?"

"You okay, Robbie?" the man asked.

"I don't know," he said, scratching his head. He looked behind once more, then said, "I'm going to take a walk."

He shuffled out of the living area and headed toward the lobby.

"Robbie," Robert said, "Don't freak out. This is dad."

His son twisted so violently that he lost his balance and had to stagger a short step to the wall for support. Robert was immediately expelled. He waited for a moment as Robbie searched the lobby, and down the hall.

"What the hell?" he muttered as he rubbed his temple.

Robert popped back in. "I'm inside your head—"

"Frankie?"

“No, it’s dad.”

Robbie forced him out again. “This is bullshit.”

He actually knocked on his skull with his knuckles.

This was tougher than Robert had imagined. Usually, he struggled to remain undetected, but trying to establish his presence was beginning to look impossible.

Popping back in, he said. “My body was frozen. But I’m still around.”

Robbie stiffened, his eyes darting once again around the lobby. Then he slumped further into the wall. “Are you kidding me?”

“No. I saw your friend Frankie die last spring. I’m sorry about that.”

“Yeah, well you and Rachel are the only ones who give a shit.”

“Why did it take so long for the paramedics to respond?” Robert asked.

“Because they’re not supposed to do anything to prolong our lives. We’re supposed to shrivel up and die in here. The sooner the better.”

“Is that why you don’t get any pain relievers?”

Robbie snorted. “I don’t need any more drugs, dad. I’ve learned how to control the pain with my mind.”

Robert was tempted to debate how well that control was working, but he let it go. Instead, he said, “Good for you.”

That seemed to irritate Robbie. He pushed off the wall and started back for the living area. “What are you doing here anyway?”

Such a direct question caught Robert off guard. “I came to see you.”

“Yeah? Did you come see me in prison, too? Were you there the day my leg got sliced open? Did you get your jollies watching me take it in the ass for a fix?”

“Robbie—”

Robert found himself back in the hallway, with Robbie shuffling on ahead.

His son sat in one of the chairs, but after only a few minutes, he was on his feet again. He paced along the back of the room, his cane coming down hard on the tile floor each time. At the window, he stared out across a vacant field. Then he banged his head against the glass.

"You okay, Robbie?" a man asked.

Wearily, Robbie straightened. "Yeah, I just kind of lost it there for a minute."

He shuffled back across the room. This time his cane didn't crack with anger.

Out in the hallway, he asked, "Are you still here?"

Robert popped back in. "Yeah."

"Sorry about that," Robbie said. "I thought I'd gotten rid of all that rage. Sometimes it sneaks back on me."

"You've got a lot to be angry about."

Robbie shook his head. "Let's not go there. Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

"I'm going to be revived."

"I saw that on the news."

"I was afraid..." Robert debated how honest he should be. "I was afraid you might not still be here when I come back."

"Yeah," Robbie said, massaging an aching knuckle. "I probably won't be."

"Plus, when I'm reanimated, I won't remember this visit today. I'll be back to the man I was the day I died."

"Huh."

"What I'm saying is, I'll feel the same way about you that I did then."

"So basically, you'll hate my guts."

The intensity of Robbie's pain, combined with the brutality of the truth, forced Robert out for a moment. He stood next to his son, relieved to be out of that misery, and away from the stench of that hellhole. But then he chastised himself for his cowardice and pressed back inside.

“You’re right. I don’t know if I truly hated you, but I’m sure if you’re still alive, I won’t come to visit like Rachel and her family does. I want you to know that I’m really sorry—for a lot of things.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up. I made my peace with this whole fucked up mess years ago.”

He crept over to the chair beside the reception desk and eased himself down. Relief from Robbie’s throbbing leg was immediate. Robert slowly blew out a breath, hoping to quiet the pulsing ache in his back. He wondered again how his son dealt with the pain.

Robbie felt the relief as well. With a sigh, he asked, “Do you do this...visiting...with Rachel, too?”

“No, that would be kind of complicated, what with Min and kids and grandkids. I think I’ll just wait and meet them all when I come back.”

“As the jerk.”

Robert chuckled. “Yeah, as the jerk.”

“So, what’s it like?” Robbie asked. “Being dead?”

“It’s got its ups and downs.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Settling back in the chair, Robert told his son about Suzanne, how they met after her accident, and how she had overridden the system to stay with her injured daughter.

"She came with me a few times when I visited you. And she saw that program on television, where you talked about prison. We were at Rachel and Min's place. I was so proud of you."

"Sounds like you and this Suzanne are pretty tight. When you come back, I guess you two will hook up?"

"I wish."

Robert explained that she hadn't contracted to be frozen, so once he was reanimated, they would no longer be together.

"That sucks," Robbie said. "And you're saying that when you wake up, you won't remember anything? Not even her?"

"Yeah. We're trying to make the most of the time we have left."

"So why are you hanging around here?"

"Come on, this is important to me," Robert said. "Tell me about your friend Frank."

"Ah, Frankie." Robbie shook his head. "He was my best friend. You know, he's the one who sliced open my leg."

"Yeah."

"Weird, huh? But at the time, he was just a scared punk like me. He had to choose sides, and he went with the toughs. Believe me, that was much easier, and less painful, than trying to go up against bullies like Del."

"I was there, at the prison, the day you came to Frankie's defense. That was a real shocker, wasn't it?"

"No shit? You were there?"

"Yeah. I started hanging around a lot more after the attack. Or after Rachel got you pointed in the right direction."

I have to tell you," Robert added. "I don't see how you endured all that punishment."

"I got real good at tuning out all the shit that got heaped on me in prison. That concentration has come in handy."

Robbie absent-mindedly rubbed his leg, and Robert realized they'd been so busy talking that he'd forgotten about the pain.

One of the other men came shuffling out of the living area, and cocked his head to one side.

"Who you talking to, Robbie?"

"My dad."

The poor old guy looked despairingly at Robbie.

"Get this," Robbie said with a grin. "He thinks I'm crazy because I'm talking to you."

"Maybe I should go," Robert said.

"You don't want to stick around for dinner?"

"No thanks. I've seen it," Robert snorted. "I'll come back by tomorrow, if that's okay."

"Sure."

Robbie stood, like he was going to walk Robert to the door.

"Look," he said as he slowed to a stop. "That night at the house...when mom was shot—"

His voice wavered, and he swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat. Grief added a new layer to all the pain. Robert felt tears pool in his eyes.

"I know," he said softly. "I was there."

\* \* \*

Robert fully intended to go back to Virginia the next morning, right after a couple sips of Melinda's fresh-brewed coffee and a nibble of Dan's bagel. Hopefully, by the time he arrived, Robbie would have already chugged his sludge.

But then Maggie showed up, a little agitated.

"You've got to come out to the center. Sam wants to talk to all of us."

She didn't even wait for a reply; she just whooshed away.

Most of the other temps were already there when Robert and Suzanne arrived. The halls were as packed as a New York sidewalk at quitting time. Sam was wandering up and down the hallway, asking everyone to go outside to the parking lot for a meeting.

Once everyone had gathered, Sam climbed up on a car in the middle of the throng.

"The reanimation schedule continues to get moved up almost every day," he said. "The Germans came up with an even faster technique which we're using in the States now. Doctors are actually waiting for clones to mature. You *must* stick around."

Brian Campbell, from the emo group, jumped up onto the car in the next parking slot over from Sam.

"This is bullshit," he yelled. "We've had it with you assholes telling us what to do."

His little band of angst-ridden teens cheered and shook their fists in the air.

"We are NOT coming back," Brian screamed at the crowd. "We intend to be as far away from the center as possible. Our group has pledged to do whatever we can to keep Sheila Raney from returning to her body."

"Who's Sheila Raney?" Robert asked Maggie.

"I guess she's the last of the emos to be frozen," she said. "It's been so long since we've gotten an emotionally disturbed kid, I don't really remember what she looks like."

"So what do you think?" he asked. "Can they actually prevent her from coming back?"

"I don't know. Sounds like they're pretty desperate."

"Yeah, well so am I," Robert said. "I think it's worth checking out."

Brian announced that his group was splitting. Half of their band was going to Afghanistan with Sheila. Their intention was to hide out in the caves that Osama bin Laden had used way back in the early part of the twenty-first century. The

band of misfits thought the mountains, halfway around the world, would act as a shield.

If that didn't work, the other half of the group would stay at the center to try one last effort to keep Sheila from returning to her body.

Robert and Suzanne volunteered to go with the emos. Maggie and Joe would stay to see what happened at center.

Once Brian came down off the roof of the car, Maggie pulled him aside.

"What if you try a little experiment," she said. "The group that stays here needs to find a squatter for Sheila's clone. If you succeed in preventing Sheila from returning, it seems to me that someone is going to have to claim that body. If it remains uninhabited, that clone could act like a giant magnet, just waiting for Sheila."

For the first time ever, Robert watched the glower on Brian's face fade.

"That's not a bad idea," he said. "For an old bag like you."

\* \* \*

The trip to Afghanistan was a bust. After spending fifteen hours on a flight to Kabul, Robert and Suzanne followed Brian and his ragtag team for another two days through the barren Hindu Kush Mountains. Obviously, Brian had no idea where he was going. He'd seen a story in National Geographic and evidently thought there would be road signs pointing the way.

They'd still be wandering aimlessly if Sheila hadn't just disappeared. One minute she was complaining about one of her high school teachers, and the next minute she was just gone. There was no yelp, no trailing vapor, nothing.

Robert and Suzanne even zipped back to the center to see if a squatter might have staked a claim on Sheila. Once again, their hopes were dashed.

\* \* \*

"I guess I'll go see Robbie," Robert lamented as he slouched in the hallway of the center. "He's probably wondering what happened to me."

Suzanne nodded. "Maybe I'll go see Angie for a couple days. Now that Mark is no longer around, I can enjoy my daughter again."

"Why don't we meet in Dayton on Friday?" Robert said. "Maybe it will rain this weekend and Dan will talk Melinda into hanging around in bed Sunday morning."

He wagged an eyebrow to make sure Suzanne got his drift. She did.

\* \* \*

Robbie was watching a game show with his buddies when Robert arrived. Steeling himself for the pain, Robert slipped inside and gently made his presence known. Then he asked if Robbie wanted to go talk in the hallway.

"Nah," Robbie said. "I'm comfortable here."

He stretched his tired body up out of his armchair a fraction to look around the room. "Besides, it'll be funny to watch these guys get all riled up again. Last time you were here, they thought I'd snapped."

"Sorry I didn't get back sooner."

"Look at 'em," Robbie cackled. "They're freaking out already."

The man sitting next to Robbie actually got up and moved away. He tapped another man's shoulder and they both stared at Robbie.

"They care about you."

"You sound down in the dumps," Robbie said. "What's up?"

He told Robbie about the wasted trip to Afghanistan.

"It was stupid," Robert said. "I can't believe we thought it would work."

"We were watching a program about you guys last week," Robbie said. "They're thawing out folks who've been frozen for fifty years or more. And because you don't remember anything, the fine folks at that center are re-educating the newly revived. They hook you up to a computer and just feed your brain all the stuff you don't know."

"So I've heard."

"Sounds like 1984 to me. Who decided what was important and what wasn't?" Robbie tittered his head at the arrogance. "Oh, and there's a fee involved in this 'education'."

"Of course."

A man sitting in front of Robbie turned in his chair to peer around the back. His eyebrows connected as he scowled.

"Hey, did you know you're expected to work for that company for three years? It's to pay for your clone."

"I figure three years is reasonable," Robert said. "Especially when you consider how little I paid way back then. Besides, it will probably take me three years to get acclimated to all the new technology. All this time, we thought we'd be prepared for all these changes."

"The way they talked on that show, they want to have everyone brought back by the end of next month."

"I know. They're going to get to me pretty soon. That's why I'm here. I want to do something for you."

"What can you do for me?"

"I feel terrible that you live with this pain everyday. It's a shame you can't get back outside just once more. Live a day as a pain-free man."

Robbie snorted in disbelief, and all the men's heads jerked up, like he'd just taken his last breath.

"Of course, you wouldn't actually be able to smell the roses," Robert said.

"What are you talking about?" Robbie asked.

Robert lowered his voice, as though by whispering his idea, it wouldn't sound as ridiculous.

"What if we could trade places? I'd take your place here, and you would be free to...I don't know...take a holiday for a day or two."

"You're full of shit," Robbie said.

"It might not work," Robert said. "But I pop in and out of your head now. Why can't we switch places?"

"And what would I do on this holiday?"

"Anything you want! Go to a park, visit a museum. Heck, they have flights to New York every hour. You could fly up and spend the day and still be back tomorrow."

Robbie's voice cracked with emotion. "You would do that for me?"

"I actually thought about trying to give you my body," Robert said. "But then I realized how pompous that was. Why would you want to wake up and be me?"

"Hell, that would be a whole lot better than being *me* for another lifetime? I can't even remember most of what went on between the time I was twelve until I was in my forties."

Another man shuffled over. He bent and touched Robbie's hand while he gazed into Robbie's eyes. "You gotta stop this, man."

Robbie waved him away. "I'm fine. My dad's just feeding me a bunch of bullshit."

"It's not bullshit. Would you like to trade places for a day? Just to see if we can do it?" Robert asked.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"Hell, yeah, I'd like to try trading," Robbie said. "I just don't think it will work. I mean, how would we do it?"

"It's hard to explain. But remember when I told you about getting into a fight with that guy on the cruise? And how Suzanne and I connected on the beach in Cayman?"

"Yeah, but you could see them," Robbie said. "I can't see you. I just hear you. How are we going to connect? Meet at my medulla oblongata in ten minutes?"

"I'm not sure. I'd just have to try it."

"Well, have at it."

Robert took a deep breath through Robbie. "Relax, and close your eyes."

Once he closed his eyes, Robert concentrated, putting all his thoughts into bonding with his son. He felt a slight tingle in his fingertips, like his hand had gone to sleep. He thought harder.

The tingle became stronger, running up his arms and legs. But then Robbie's body convulsed and Robert quickly stopped.

"What happened?" Robbie asked. "Why did you stop?"

"I was afraid I might hurt you."

"Jesus Christ, Dad. How could you hurt me?"

"I don't know—"

"Try it again. And don't stop."

After another deep breath, Robert poured all his energy into bringing that tingling back. It grew stronger, radiating up his limbs and into his chest. He felt a tightness, like he was having a heart attack. At the same time, Robbie's body seemed to stretch like it might rip open. The pain intensified. Robert had the distinct feeling that he was pushing against an expanding force that threatened to explode.



A pounding in his head made his ears throb. When he thought he could not endure the pain any longer, he shouted, "Now!"

Then bam! Robbie's body was thrown to the floor.

A splitting headache squeezed his head like a vice. Robert eased open his eyes and moaned at the pain that seemed to assault him from all sides. One of Robbie's friends bent over, his eyes gushing tears.

"Robbie? Thank God! Thank God! We thought you were dying."

Robert shifted slightly. He was lying on a bed. And his hands had been folded neatly over his chest.

"What's going on?" he croaked.

"We don't know. You were jabbering like a madman, and then you flew out of your chair. I thought you were possessed."

"No, it was nothing like that."

Robert jerked to sitting like a fifty-seven year old man would. But an eighty-eight year-old back screamed with pain. His neck seized in a spasm and his arthritic fingers cramped. He flopped back onto the bed.

"Robbie?" he called quietly. No one answered.

Other men crowded around his bed, all of them with fearful expressions. They were sure Robbie had gone around the bend.

"What time is it?" Robert asked.

The concerned expressions morphed into confusion. One man finally said, "Deal of the Century just ended."

Robert guesstimated it was mid-afternoon. He'd been out for about five hours. He eased his head up to glance at the floor. Was Robbie still lying unconscious somewhere?

His curiosity was replaced quickly with more immediate problems. Not only was his leg throbbing, but he felt nauseous from the pounding in his head.

And the smell! It was like being stuck inside a port-o-let in the heat of summer.

He ran a hand down his face to block some of the stench, but even his own palm stunk. Everything seemed magnified, as if he had only been sharing part of Robbie's torment. Now it was all on Robert.

"Dear God," he moaned. "Does anyone have something for a headache?"

"You know we don't have drugs," one of the men said.

"Not even aspirin?"

"What's wrong with you, Robbie?"

"Never mind." Robert reached up a hand and one of the men pulled him to sitting. Robbie had mentioned that walking sometimes relieved the pain. It was worth a shot.

He milled around the living area, trying to concentrate on some program on the television, but he couldn't escape the pain. He leaned against the wall and pulled his robe up to examine his leg. The front of the thigh was withered where the muscle had atrophied. The skin had bunched up around an indented scar that ran from mid-thigh down to his knee. How did Robbie endure the misery day after day? And how had he forgiven the man who did that to him?

He caught a man staring.

"Tell me how Robbie does those relaxation chants."

The man panicked, the stubble of beard on his chin quivering. "Don't do this Rob. Pull yourself together."

Robert thought about explaining what was going on, but it sounded ridiculous even to him.

The bell chimed, and Robert took his place at the back of the line for his 'meal'. His first sip of the viscous glop nearly gagged him. The drink was neither sweet or salty; it didn't taste like beef, or chicken, or even vegetables. It was just... thick. It did, however, have a chalky aftertaste, and left a film on the roof of his mouth. How cruel did mankind have to be to subject these men to indignities like this?

Right after dinner, he went to bed, hoping to sleep away as many hours as possible until Robbie got back. He managed to doze off, but two hours later, he woke up with a full bladder. It didn't seem possible that the glass of sludge he'd choked down earlier could create such urgency. He rolled out of bed and quickly teetered to the bathroom. He expected an immediate rush of urine, but after weaving on his feet for several minutes, he only squeezed a few drops out.

Wide awake, Robert laid in bed thinking about Suzanne. She was somewhere in London, hanging around Angie. He tried to remember what the time difference was, but couldn't concentrate. He imagined the look of shock on her face when he told her about trading places with Robbie.

His thoughts turned to his son. Sure, he'd been a thoughtless, selfish kid, but had he really deserved to spend his life in prison because he'd had a drug abuse problem? For most of that time, he'd lived with excruciating pain that never let up.

Robert closed his eyes, slowly filled his lungs, then gradually blew the air back out through a small part between his lips. He began to hum Robbie's chant.

He managed to doze off, but he was awake again before the sun came up. There was no point in getting out of bed. The lights were on automatic timers. So was the television. The bell for breakfast wouldn't ring until eight o'clock. Then he and the other men would vegetate in front of the TV until the lights were turned back off at night. These men were not behind bars, but they were definitely still in prison.

Midway through the afternoon, Robert found himself watching the clock, hoping Robbie would return soon. When Robbie didn't show up, he chastised himself for being so selfish. His son had not truly been free for nearly sixty years. And unfortunately, the two men had not made specific arrangements for Robbie's return.

When dinnertime came and went, Robert started getting nervous. He couldn't spend another night here. Was it Thursday? Or Friday? Suzanne would be back in Dayton soon. He had hoped to get there first.

Of course, if she arrived in Dayton and he wasn't there, she'd come to the retirement home, wouldn't she?

After a show about an intergalactic bounty hunter ended at ten o'clock, the television turned off.

"Let's go, Robbie," Jason said. "Lights out. Remember?"

The men had fifteen minutes to get settled in the sleeping ward before all lights were extinguished. Robert took one last look at the front door, like he might see Suzanne or Robbie magically appear. Then he went to bed.

He tried the relaxation chant, but he was too tired, and in too much pain, to concentrate. Why hadn't he asked Robbie more about how he controlled the pain? Because he was so busy bragging about his wonderful life with Suzanne and all the fabulous things they did.

An uncomfortable fear crept into the room and hovered over Robert; an uneasiness that he'd been trying to keep at bay.

Robbie wasn't coming back.

He'd be a fool to return to this wretched body. As soon as he was free of the pain, he must have run away at full speed. By now, he could be anywhere in the world, reveling in his new life.

The thought whipped Robert's heart into a galloping frenzy in his chest. The rush of blood made his leg pulse, and his temples threatened to burst.

*Calm down!* Robert demanded. He sucked in gulps of air and tried to keep from quivering as he blew back out.

Robbie would be back in the morning, he assured himself; by noon at the latest. There was no reason to panic.

*You're the one who told him to go to New York,* Robert scolded.

Then he argued back. *Just take it easy. Have a little faith.*

By noon the next day, the fear had returned, and Robert was fighting hysteria again.

Robbie was gone for good.

One of the other men laid a hand on Robert's knee. He jumped.

"You okay, Robbie?"

Looking down, Robert saw that his hands were shaking uncontrollably. He was breathing so hard, his throat was parched.

"I've got to get out of here," he mumbled.

And once that idea awakened, he could not ignore it.

There was no reason to wait for Robbie. He would simply slip out of that haggard body and go to Dayton. After all, he'd escaped the mechanic on that cruise ship, and that guy had had Robert in a hammerlock.

Then of course, he worried about Robbie's body. If Robert left, would the body stop functioning? Would the heart stop, or would some automatic pilot keep the system running in a vegetative state?

"Who cares?" Robert snapped.

The man sitting beside him shied away.

Getting out of that worn-out body was the best thing that ever happened to Robbie. He was out now having a great time. In fact, Robert reasoned, Robbie would probably never even come back, so what did it matter?

Concentrating his breathing, Robert closed his eyes. It shouldn't be too hard to get out. He was in and out of Dan all the time. Drawing in one last breath, Robert exhaled and willed himself free.

It didn't work.

He knew immediately because the pain was still gnawing at every nerve ending in his body. Sweat pooled under his arms, and when he shifted, the odor of stress disgusted him.

Leaning back into the chair, he massaged his head into the cushion, and relaxed his arms at his sides. Another deep breath, and—.

He couldn't get out.

Again and again he tried, straining to make it happen. All he got for his effort was another headache. Sweat trickled down his chest and drizzled between his legs. His racing heart made him light-headed.

"Okay, just stop!" he scolded himself. The men nearby flinched like cattle about to stampede.

If he didn't get a grip on things, he'd never be able to think clearly. He took another calming breath and blew it out.

One thing was certain. If he couldn't get out of Robbie's body, he was going to get out of the building. He'd catch a plane, he'd ride a bus, hell, he'd walk all the way to Ohio if he had to. He was going to Suzanne.

Scooting out of his chair, Robert grabbed his cane and dragged himself to the window. His damp gown was cold against his back, and he shivered. Raising his cane like a baseball bat, and swung at the glass with all his strength. The cane merely bounced off the surface.

Some of the men in the room jumped to their feet at the sound. Others cried out in shock.

"What the hell are you doing, Robbie?"

"I'm leaving," he grunted as he took another swing at the window.

He didn't have the strength to follow through. The glass didn't show even a nick or crack. In fact, when the cane hit, Robert didn't hear the familiar ping of glass.

"Great," he mumbled. "It's plastic."

Turning to the man sitting closest to the window, Robert said, "Get up."

"What?"

"Get up!"

The man rose out of his chair. Robert wrapped his arms around the chair back and tried to lift. It was way too heavy for his eighty-eight year-old body.

"Help me!" he yelled at the man.

At first, the man backed away, like Robert had asked him to slit his wrists, but then a shy smile creased his cheeks. The old man grabbed the arms of the chair, and together, they lifted.

But all they managed to do was get the chair off the floor. They didn't have the power needed to drive the chair through the window. Then a third man hobbled over, and at the count of three, they heaved the chair against the window.

The chair bounced off, sending them all tumbling to the floor.

Crying out in frustration, Robert rolled onto his back. A memory flashed through his mind of Suzanne, huddled in the corner of Angie's hospital room. She'd tried to get out, to crossover, but she couldn't. He remembered teasing her because she'd taken her predicament so seriously. It didn't seem so funny now.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Long after the other two men struggled to their feet and shuffled away, Robert lay on the floor, letting his heart calm, gathering strength, and planning his next attack.

The call bell was his next idea. He remembered how, when Frankie had fallen, someone had pulled an emergency alarm on the wall and the paramedics had come. Sure, they'd taken a long time, but since Robert wasn't really hurt, it didn't matter.

He envisioned waiting at the front door, and when the paramedics arrived, he would greet them, and then wedge something in the closing door. Once the EMTs got past the lobby, Robert would slip out.

But then Robert considered the plan more realistically. How far could he get? He had no money, he was wearing a goofy nightgown, he averaged about one mile per hour, and he had to pee at least twenty times a day.

His final plan was a lot less appealing, but it seemed to be his only other option.

Rolling to his side, he pulled himself up using the overturned chair for support. His left arm pulsed as though he might have sprained a muscle. Once on his feet, he stood quietly until his dizziness passed.

He wandered around the room, examining other chairs, the few tables, even the handle on the open door to the community room. Nothing looked promising.

Frustrated, he banged his cane against the doorjamb and heard the same kind of plastic thunk as the window. Drawing the cane up to his face, he studied the shaft, then he examined the gap between the open door and the jamb.

"That might work," he said.

He tried to wedge the crook of the cane between the door and the jamb, but the wide handle would not fit. The bottom of the cane definitely looked narrower.



He leaned against the wall for support, then wrapped his hand around the rubber tip on the end of his cane and twisted. The cap didn't budge. He took a deep breath and tried again. The tip refused to move. His arthritic fingers screamed with pain but he didn't care. He twisted harder.

His back cramped from the stress. Sweat beaded on his lip.

"Again," he commanded through clenched teeth.

When he could no longer bear the pain in his right hand, he switched to his left.

By now, the men in the room had turned a deaf ear to his rantings, and a blind eye to his madness.

"Come...on!" he bellowed, and at last, he felt a slight shift in the rubber.

"That's it," he coaxed the cap. "A little more."

The tip came off with a little pop, and Robert uttered a giddy laugh. He staggered back to the closest chair and sat until his panting subsided, and the throbbing in his fingers eased. If this was going to work, he'd need every bit of energy he could muster.

When he thought he was ready, he opened the door as wide as it would go, and slid the end of his cane between the door and the jamb. It barely fit. Then with the cane halfway through, he used the door as a fulcrum and threw all his weight against the shaft.

He heard a snap, like plastic under stress, and pushed harder. The cane bowed, but held firm.

"Not enough force," he said.

Easing up on the pressure, he leaned back, then gripped the crook of the cane with one hand, the shaft with the other, and lurched forward. The cane splintered and Robert flew onto the floor, the crook of the cane still clutched in one fist. His other arm lay wedged under his body at an unnatural angle. He was sure it was broken.

Ignoring the pain, he turned the cane to examine the broken end. A jagged ring of plastic revealed a hollow

center.

"Thank God for cheap bastards," he mumbled.

He scooted his hips and shifted his shoulders until he was comfortable on the floor. Then gripping the cane at the jagged end, he dug the plastic snags into the soft underside of his broken arm and tore through the flesh all the way to his wrist.

"Robbie! No!!" one of the men yelled. But he was too late.

Dropping the cane to the floor, Robert let his head flop to the side. He watched, fascinated, as Robbie's blood pooled beside him on the faded tile.

He was vaguely aware of several men lifting him up and carrying him into the ward where he was laid on his bed.

One of the men who stood nearby was crying.

"I'm sorry," Robert told the man. Then he drifted into the best sleep he'd had since he'd traded places with his son.

He dreamed that he was lounging in a small boat. Gentle waves rocked him, and sunshine bathed his face in warmth.

"Robbie?"

Robert's eyes flew open. "Suzanne?!"

"Is that you, Robert?" she asked.

With a tremulous sigh, he said, "You came."

"What happened here?" she cried.

"I traded places with Robbie," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "He was just supposed to stay out for a day or two, but he didn't come back."

"Oh, Robert. How awful."

"I'm so sorry," Robert groaned. "I don't know what I was thinking. I just wanted to do something nice for Robbie."

Although he could not see her, her presence made his heart race.

"That was very noble of you, Sweetheart."

"But I've wasted our last few days together, for some stupid notion."

He told her about wanting to give his body to Robbie.

"That's not stupid," she said. "It's brilliant."

"Well, it doesn't really matter now. He's gone for good."

Robert shivered. His son's blood had soaked into the bed linens and turned cold.

"My dear, sweet Robert," Suzanne murmured. "I wish I could hold you in my arms. You're freezing."

At least the pain was gone.

"It won't be long now," he whispered.

\* \* \*

Melinda was at the sink, washing the dinner dishes. Robert found Dan coming up the basement steps with a case of canning jars in his arms.

The moment he set the box on the kitchen table, Robert popped into his head and took over. He walked Dan over to Melinda, turned her around, her hands dripping water, and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"I love you so much," Robert told Suzanne.

Melinda giggled nervously for a second, then she threw her arms around Dan's neck, and Suzanne pressed herself against Robert in a passionate kiss.

The dishes were abandoned, the canning jars left dusty. In the fading light of dusk, Robert combed his fingers through silky hair. He trailed his hand along Suzanne's curved waist to her hip, and felt her palms massage his shoulders.

Twice, Robert stopped their lovemaking because he didn't want the moment to end. Then when Dan climaxed, Robert bellowed right along with him. And Melinda's orgasm must have been just as intense because she burst into tears with the release.

She apologized for her outburst as they lay in each other's arms.

"I don't know what brought that on," she said, her voice trembling.

"I don't either," Dan said, just as bewildered. "But that one definitely goes on the list of best sex ever." They both laughed. Robert and Suzanne lay cuddled nearby.

"He's right," Robert said. "That definitely belongs in the record books. I don't think I've ever been so glad to be dead as I was back there when I finally got out of Robbie's body."

"That was quite a gamble you took."

"No kidding." Robert raised up on one elbow. "You know, when Robbie and I decided to trade places, it was really difficult. At the time, I remember thinking that it was a lot like giving birth. It felt like I was trying to push an elephant out through Robbie's left nostril."

Suzanne cackled. "Wrong end."

"Yeah, well, I was in his head."

He rolled so that he hovered over her, and braced his forearms near her head.

"I love you," he said. "I wish we could just stay here until I'm called."

"No," Suzanne said. "I can't let you just slip away from me like that. I want to be at the center, so I can be prepared when your time comes."

\* \* \*

"You're cutting it kind of close," Sam barked when they walked into the waiting room at the hospital. "They're on Jack MacIlhenny. Then it's Bruce, Myra, a couple of temps from the Arizona facility, and you're up."

"Will they get to me today?" Robert asked.

"It's hard to say," Sam said. "They pulled your body out of the Dewar a couple days ago. Once you're thawed, they'll send the nanobots in to disconnect your brain. Are you interested in watching?"

Robert looked at Suzanne. She gave him a resigned nod.

Sam led them to a room with glass cylinders positioned horizontally on gurneys every few feet. In each one, a body

floated in liquid. There were temps at each of the cylinders, watching, waiting. Some of them had friends at their side for support.

“Over here,” Sam said.

They wove through the maze of temps and equipment until they came to Robert. His body was pasty white, and looked bloated. At one end of the cylinder, monitors blinked and digital numbers flashed.

“Oh, you’re getting close,” Sam said, tapping the panel.

The temperature gauge read ninety-six point three. When the temperature hit ninety-eight point six, a beeper sounded. A technician left the pod he was monitoring and came over to Robert’s.

The fluid in the chamber drained. Then the tech unlocked the pod, typed some codes into a keypad, and a robotic arm with a syringe at the end appeared overhead.

“Those are the nanobots,” Sam explained. “They’re injected into the brain through the spinal cord. They’ll disperse in your brain and get busy. Each one has a specific task to perform to disconnect your brain from the stem. And all of the information will be recorded so when your brain is put in the clone, the process is reversed.”

It was impossible to see anything happening. The numbers on a monitor scrolled up so fast, they were nothing but a blur.

Robert longed to take Suzanne’s hand. He looked into her eyes.

“Are you sure you want to be here?”

“I’m not leaving your side.”

They followed Sam to the surgical suite. On a table under bright lights, lay Robert’s clone, a young twenty-one year old.

“You’re so handsome,” Suzanne said.

Sam joined them. “More nanobots are in there, disconnecting the clone’s brain.”

Suzanne frowned.

"Don't worry," he said. "There was never any real activity. No knowledge. It's just a dormant brain."

A robotic arm lowered near the clone's head, and a laser flashed, cutting a circle around the top of the shaved skull.

"What are they doing?" Robert asked.

"They have to take the blank brain out, and put yours in. And they have to collect all the nanobots from your body's circulatory system, get them reorganized and reprogrammed. Then they'll reinject them, and the bots will attach your brain to the clone's brain stem."

"How long do I have?" Robert asked.

"Maybe an hour."

He and Suzanne pushed through a huddle of on-lookers to a corner of the surgical suite where they could be alone. They sank to the floor with their backs to the wall.

"I must have told you a million times that I love you," he said, "but it still doesn't seem like enough."

Her eyes were as sad as the first day he met her.

"I know," she said. "I love you, too. I always will."

"I'm so sorry I won't be able to remember."

She nodded and gave him a bittersweet smile.

"Whatever you do," he said, "please don't follow me once I'm alive again. I want you to remember me like this, not like some jerk."

"I promise."

Someone shouted from across the room, and a few of the temps milling around crowded together to see what the disturbance was about.

"Get out of my way!" Someone yelled. A couple of the temps stood shoulder to shoulder, like they were trying to keep a squatter out. But a man pushed through them with a growl.

"I've got business here!" he guffed.

It was Robbie.

He looked as shriveled and withered as ever, but his shoulders didn't look as stooped, weighed down with the pain. Once he saw Robert, he strode over, elbowing people out of his way.

"Jesus Christ, Dad," he carped when he stopped in front of Robert. "Why didn't you tell me traveling was such a bitch?"

Robert clamored to his feet. "Traveling?"

"Yeah. You sure as hell can't catch a cab. And have you ever tried to get off a bus when it's moving?"

The scowl on Robbie's face smoothed momentarily. "Is this your lady friend?"

Unable to speak, Robert simply nodded.

Robbie extended a crippled hand to shake. "Glad to meet you, Suzanne."

She threw her arms around him. "And I'm very glad to see you, Robbie."

He backed away from her embrace and turned on Robert. "I guess I'm not too late, no thanks to you."

"Where did you go?" Robert asked.

"Hell, I've been all over this goddamn country," Robbie said. "I was going to just tour Richmond, you know, check out the town. But the bus I got on went out to the airport. So, I figure what the hell. I'll do like you said and fly to New York. The whole goddamn town is changed. I couldn't find anything I remembered."

Robert nodded numbly. "I suppose not."

"I finally I just gave up and went back to the airport. And guess what? The Richmond airport was closed because of some damn hurricane heading up the east coast."

Robert and Suzanne blurted out their shock at the same time. "What?"

"Yeah," Robbie said. "Don't you watch the news?"

"No," Robert snipped. "You watch game shows!"

"Oh, yeah." Robbie tilted his head up wistfully, thinking back. "Anyway, I finally get back to Richmond, and guess what? Somebody slit my wrists!"

Chagrined, Robert raised his eyebrows and gritted his teeth. "Oops."

"Yeah, oops. Not that I cared about that old bag of bones," Robbie said, "but I wasted two days for nothing."

"I guess your demise wasn't on the news," Robert said.

Robbie wobbled his head at Robert's attempt at humor. "So then I caught a flight to St. Louis, to the Cryonics Center —"

"Oh, no!" Suzanne groaned.

"Oh, yes. But of course, that facility was shut down *years* ago. Something else I wasn't told."

Robbie glared at Robert, his mouth puckered in a scowl.

"For someone who's trying to work a trade here," he said, "You sure made things difficult."

"How did you find us?" Robert asked.

"They've turned the center into a little museum. There's all these fake bodies and brains all over the place with little plaques explaining the process. One of the plaques showed a map of all the centers. I went to the main center and some guy named Greyson sent me here."

Sam interrupted Robert. "It's time."

"Holy shit!" Robbie hopped from foot to foot in a little old-man shuffle. "What do we do?"

Waving an arm to move people aside, Sam led Robert and Robbie back to the clone.

"See these numbers?" he said. "They're showing how many connections have been made. When they all reach 100, you're done. That surgeon will give you a small electrical pulse to sort of reboot your brain, and bingo. You're back."

"Okay," Robert said to Robbie. "I'm going to get pulled in automatically. At the last second, I'm going to grab you and take you in with me. Then you're going to have to push me out. I'll do everything I can to help."

"Yeah, I remember," Robbie snorted. "I'll try not to send you sailing across the room like you did."



Robert glanced over at Suzanne.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

A nauseous wave roiled in Robert's belly, reminding him of that day so many years ago when he first died.

He looked into Robbie's eyes. "Thanks, Robbie. I love you."

"I love you too, Dad."

Lurching forward, Robert enveloped his son. He immediately felt that sensation of being caught under water. He fought the urge to struggle to the surface and let himself get pulled deeper.

A burning sensation sizzled through every nerve in his body, like it was on fire. He tried to cry out, but couldn't. It was dark, like the black cloud he'd gotten tangled up in with that crazy mechanic on the cruise.

Far in the distance, he heard Suzanne call to him. He tried to move in that direction, but the cloud was like spider webs, holding him back.

His lungs burned, craving a breath. He tried to run but his legs were paralyzed. He sensed that he would not be able to get a breath until he broke free.

"Leeet...gooooo!" someone called, the words so slow they seemed to be caught in the web as well.

The heat grew more intense. Robert heard a drum pounding in his ears. He surged forward, his mouth wide in a silent scream. He gasped in a gust of air and cried out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The pretty woman on the afternoon talk show wrapped up her interview with a botanist who had developed a new vegetable. A large logo behind her read simply: Mona.

"My next guest," Mona told her television audience, "has a most unusual story. But then, don't they all?" She leaned her elbows on her desk and winked at the camera. "He first sold women's clothing in a little boutique, then opened a few more larger stores along the way. At the age of fifty-seven, he found out he was dying. But instead of giving up, he had his body cryonically-preserved, and he has just recently returned to the living.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Robert Malone."

Robert walked out from behind a partition and shook hands with Mona before he sat in a chair opposite her desk.

"Thanks for coming on our show, Robert," she said.

"Thank you for having me," he replied.

"Would you mind if I gave our audience a brief history of your life?"

"Not at all."

"Robert was born and raised in Indiana," Mona told her audience. "His father had a small clothing store where he sold practical clothing to women living in a rather rural area of the state. Robert took over the business, and married a woman who modeled some of his company's fashions."

A picture appeared on a monitor of Amanda, still looking ravishing nearly a hundred years later, in the champagne-colored gown.

The studio audience oohed at her picture.

"Robert and his wife Amanda had two children, a boy and a girl."

This time the monitor showed a traditional family portrait, with little Robbie standing between Robert and Amanda, and baby Rachel perched on Amanda's lap. Robert's hand

was on Robbie's shoulder. To an outsider, it looked like a proud father and his son, but Robert remembered how he'd had to clamp a hand on Robbie to keep him from dashing away.

"Now, I'm not going to tell you anymore about Robert, but we're going to show you some fashions and see if any of you can guess. First, let's show everyone an example of the type of fashions your father sold in his store in rural Indiana."

This picture showed a buxom woman in a dowdy cotton dress and clunky, lace shoes.

Tongue-in-cheek, she asked, "Was this the latest fashion at the time?"

The studio audience tittered with chuckles.

"No, Mona," Robert said. "That might have been my father's idea of fashion, but it certainly wasn't mine."

"And when your father died, you took over the business and started selling a different line of clothing, is that right?"

Robert nodded.

"We've got some images of some of your earliest fashions." The monitor flashed mini-skirted girls in go-go boots and Mary Quant hats. Paper dresses. Plastic, see-through coats. The pictures flashed faster, showing fake fur vests and over-the-knee boots, elegant slacks belted with gold chains. Then the pictures included girls' wear, then men's wear, boys' and even infants'.

"Did any of you see an outfit that looked familiar?" Mona asked. "You might have, because all those pictures were taken from the Audrey's Corporation archives."

The audience clapped and chortled approvingly.

"And sitting here is the man who started it all, nearly one hundred years ago."

Robert nodded through the clapping and cheering. He even stood and took a small bow.

Once the audience was quiet, Mona turned to Robert. "So, here you are. A young man ready to plunge back into the world of fashion, is that right?"

“No, Mona, it’s not.” Robert paused for affect. “You see, I’m not really Robert Malone. I’m his son, Robbie.”

The studio audience went berserk.

Robert chuckled softly. “What a ham.”

He rose from the plush leather seat and extended an elbow to Suzanne. She smiled and stood, pretending to loop an arm through his.

“Just like his father,” she said.

“Much as I’d love to stay and watch the rest of this program,” he said. “We have a flight to catch.”

He escorted Suzanne out of the executive lounge and into the bustling concourse of LaGuardia airport.

“It’s going to be strange not traveling with Maggie and Joe,” Suzanne said.

“Yeah. I’m going to miss that old bird analyzing everything I say and do.”

Suzanne chuckled and snuggled closer. “She meant well.”

Robert escorted Suzanne through the huddle of people waiting to board the space shuttle and took his place first in line.

“Too bad Joe didn’t want to stick around,” Robert said. “I think he would have enjoyed spending a weekend on the Luna Liner.”

“And constantly be reminded that Maggie’s back with the living? No way,” Suzanne said.

When the doors opened, Robert stepped onto the jetway, ahead of the pack. But Suzanne hesitated.

“All your friends are gone now.”

“They were your friends, too.”

“You won’t have your meetings twice a year to catch up with all the other temps.”

“Hey,” Robert said softly. He tilted his head and held out a hand. “We’ll make new friends.”

“I hope you haven’t made a big mistake, staying with me,” she said. “You might regret letting Robbie take over.”

Reaching out his arm, Robert wrapped his elbow around her neck, and drawing near, he whispered, "Never."